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THE BLACK ACE

A



LOOK!

**THESE
TWO
TERRIFIC
ISSUES**

**NOW
ON
SALE**



**The LONG
HAUL**



**ENGAGE the
ENEMY**



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THE BLACK ACE

THE THROTTLES OF THE LANCASTER WERE SLAMMED WIDE OPEN. HER ENGINES WERE IN FINE PITCH—MAKING A NOISE LIKE AN AIRCRAFT IN PAIN. HIGH ABOVE THE LIVID NIGHTMARE OF THE RUHR VALLEY, *P FOR POPSE* SEEMED, TO THE SEVEN MEN WHO SAT INSIDE HER, TO BE THE ONLY SHIP IN THE SKY—HUGE AND VULNERABLE, AND CRUELLY DEFENCELESS...

SEVEN MEN CLUNG GRIMLY TO THEIR SLIPPING NERVES. SEVEN MEN TASTED FEAR IN THEIR MOUTHS—A FEAR THAT WENT FAR DEEPER THAN THE STEEL-SLIVERED HELL THROUGH WHICH THEY FLEW...

Chapter 1. *Flight of Fear*

SOME OF THAT FEAR WAS IN FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT BILL WEBB, THE CAPTAIN AND PILOT OF P FOR POPPER. HE BELLOWED HARSHLY ON THE INTERCOM...

WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU PLAYING AT, ABE? WE'VE RUN SMACK INTO A DEFENDED AREA! CHECK YOUR COURSE FIGURES, FOR PETE'S SAKE!

THE VOICE OF THE NAVIGATOR WAS SLOW IN ANSWERING. ABE NOLAN WAS A BIG CANADIAN. IT TOOK A LOT TO FRIGHTEN HIM, BUT THE SWEAT WAS HEAVY ON ABE'S BROW AS HE LOOKED UP FROM HIS MAPS...

I-I'M AFRAID I MIS-READ MY OWN WRITING, SKIPPER! THE COURSE I GAVE YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN ANOTHER TWENTY DEGREES STARBOARD!

GOOD GRIEF!



WEBB'S INCREDULOUS
SNARL TORE THROUGH
THE INTERCOM. IN THE
TAIL-TURRET, YOUNG
MIKE SIMPSON HEARD
IT AS HE CROUCHED
BEHIND HIS BROWNING.

WE-WE'VE
HAD IT / WE'LL
NEVER GET OUT
OF THIS ALIVE /
HE WAS RIGHT /
VIBART WAS
RIGHT!



VIBART. THE NAME WAS
BURNING IN THE MIND
OF EVERY MAN WHO
FLEW IN THE GROANING
LANCASTER. IT WAS THE
NAME OF THE LEAN,
BRIGHT-EYED FLIGHT
ENGINEER WHO SAT
NEXT TO BILL WEBB...

IT LOOKS BAD,
SKIPPER! BUT THEN,
THE CARDS TOLD US
IT WOULD BE,
DIDN'T THEY?

CURSE YOU,
VIBART / YOU
AND YOUR
PROPHECY / I DON'T
BELIEVE IT / WE'RE
GOING TO GET
OUT OF THIS,
D'YOU HEAR?



THEN, AS WEBB'S EYES FLICKED RIGHT, HE SAW ANOTHER LANCASTER, IMPALED ON A PYRAMID OF SEARCHLIGHTS, CENTRED ROUND THE STEADY, BLUE COLUMN OF A MASTER BEAM.

POOR DEVIL! HE'S CONED!

THE FLAK CLOSED ON THE TRAPPED LANCASTER. SUDDENLY, A DULL RED GLOW SPROUTED ON ITS PORT WING. THE BIG AIRCRAFT SLIPPED DOWN LIKE A SHINING, WOUNDED BIRD. WHEN THE BLAST CAME, IT STRUCK P FOR POPPIE LIKE A WALL OF WATER...

GOOD BRIEF! HE HADN'T JETTISONED HIS COOKIES!

ABRUPTLY, SHOCKINGLY, THE OTHER LANCASTER HAD DISAPPEARED, EXCEPT FOR A SINGLE, BURNING WING-TIP, SKIDDING LAZILY DOWN...

THAT COULD HAVE BEEN US, SKIPPER! IT'S BEEN BUILDING UP TO THIS, ALL THE TIME! VIBART WAS RIGHT! YOU'VE GOT TO TURN BACK!



THE FLARING VOICE OF ALBERT SPENCE, THE WIRELESS OPERATOR, STRUCK CLARITY INTO WEBB'S REELING BRAIN...

ARE YOU CRAZY, ALBERT? GET BACK TO YOUR POSITION! WE'RE GOING TO FIND THAT TARGET—AND PLASTER IT! THEN WE'RE GOING HOME, ALL OF US, IN ONE PIECE!



600 MILES TO THE EAST, AT A Bomber Base IN LINCOLNSHIRE, THE FIRST WAVES OF LANCASTERS WERE RETURNING FROM THE RAID...

WELL, THAT'S MOST OF 'A' FLIGHT ACCOUNTED FOR! GOT ANYTHING ON P-ROOSE YET?

NO, SIR! SHE RADIOED AN ENGINE FAILURE ABOUT THREE HOURS AGO! BUT THAT'S THE LAST WE'VE HEARD!



THE CODE NAME P-POPSIE WAS ON OTHER LIPS THAT NIGHT, OUTSIDE, IN THE ROARING DARKNESS, THE FITTERS AND MECHANICS WHO SERVICED HER WERE WATCHING OTHER BOMBERS DESCENDING ON THE BRIGHT FUNNEL OF THE FLARE PATH...

BILL WEBB'S BOYS ARE TWENTY MINUTES OVERDUE! D'YOU SUPPOSE ANYTHING'S HAPPENED?

WITH THEIR LUCK? NOT A CHANCE! IF THEY FELL IN THE RHINE, THEY'D COME OUT DRY! AIN'T THAT RIGHT, FLIGHT?

BUT THERE WAS A TINGE OF UNEASINESS IN THE MECHANIC'S COMMENT. IT FOUND AN ECHO IN THE LOW VOICE OF HIS RUGGED FLIGHT-SERGEANT...

I DON'T KNOW, SAMMY! THAT CREW HASN'T BEEN THE SAME SINCE THAT NEW ENGINEER JOINED THEM, JUST OVER A MONTH AGO!

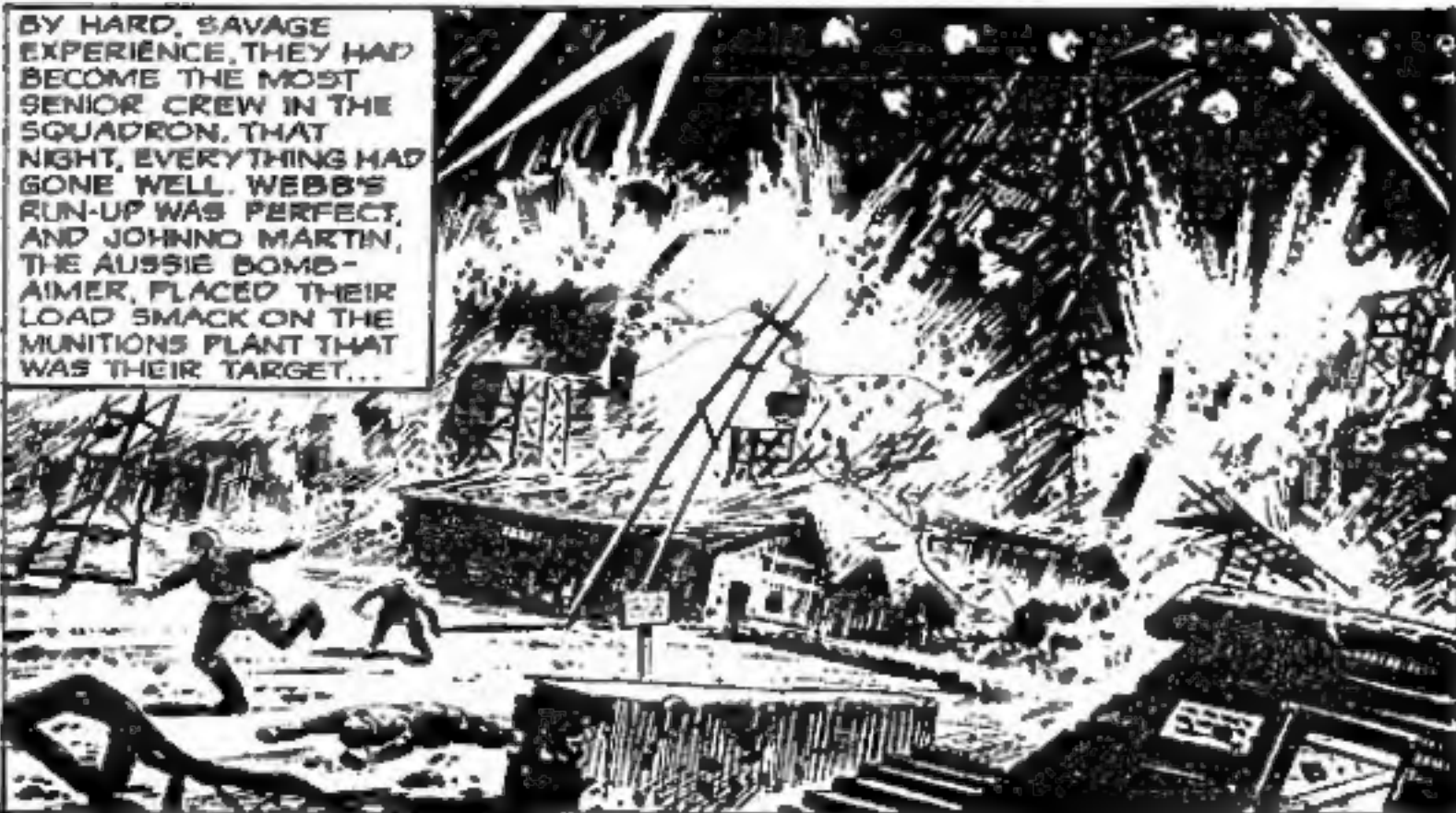


Chapter 2. Card of Death

TWO MONTHS AGO IT COULD HAVE BEEN SAFELY SAID THAT BILL WEBB'S BOYS WOULD HAVE COME BACK... EVEN FROM THE BRUTAL AIR BATTLES OF COLOGNE AND ESSEN. IT WAS IN MAY, 1943, THAT THEY FLEW THEIR 97th. OF. OVER THE FLAME-INFESTED VALLEY OF THE GERMAN RUHR...



BY HARD, SAVAGE EXPERIENCE, THEY HAD BECOME THE MOST SENIOR CREW IN THE SQUADRON. THAT NIGHT, EVERYTHING HAD GONE WELL. WEBB'S RUN-UP WAS PERFECT, AND JOHNNY MARTIN, THE AUSSIE BOMB-AIMER, PLACED THEIR LOAD SMACK ON THE MUNITIONS PLANT THAT WAS THEIR TARGET...



FLYING OFFICER EDDIE YATES HAD BEEN THE FLIGHT ENGINEER THEN. HE ADJUSTED BOOSTS AND REVE WITH COOL-FINGERED PRECISION AS WEBB SLAMMED ACROSS THE TARGET AND WEAVED NORTH TO AVOID THE FLAK...

A GOOD FRANK, BILL! AND AOPSE ISN'T EVEN SCRATCHED! LOOKS LIKE WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT AGAIN!

WE'LL MAKE IT ALL RIGHT, EDDIE! WITH A BIT OF LUCK, AS THEY SAY!



LUCK! WHEN CREWS THOUGHT OF LUCK, THEY THOUGHT OF BILL WEBB'S BOYS. AND THE LATTER WERE ALWAYS READY TO ADMIT THAT THEY WERE LUCKY. PARTICULARLY MIKE SIMPSON, THE TAIL-GUNNER, AS HE GRINNED AT THE TOY KOALA BEAR MASCOT THAT HE ALWAYS CARRIED...

SURE WE'LL MAKE IT / OLD MONTY'LL SEE TO THAT, WON'T YOU, BOY?



The Black Ace

BUT IT WAS MORE THAN LUCK THAT HAD MADE THE CREW OF P-40 POPPIE INTO A FIGHTING CORPORATE TEAM. TAKE ABE NOLAN THE NAVIGATOR THEY HAD NEVER KNOWN HIM TO ASK FOR A PINPOINT W-9 NASAL, CANADIAN VOICE WAS CHANTING THE RETURN COURSE LONG BEFORE WEEDS NEEDED IT

ONE MINUTE TO TURNING POINT
SKIPPER! NEW COURSE,
ONE O-EIGHT
MAGNETIC!

ONE-
O-EIGHT,
IT IS!



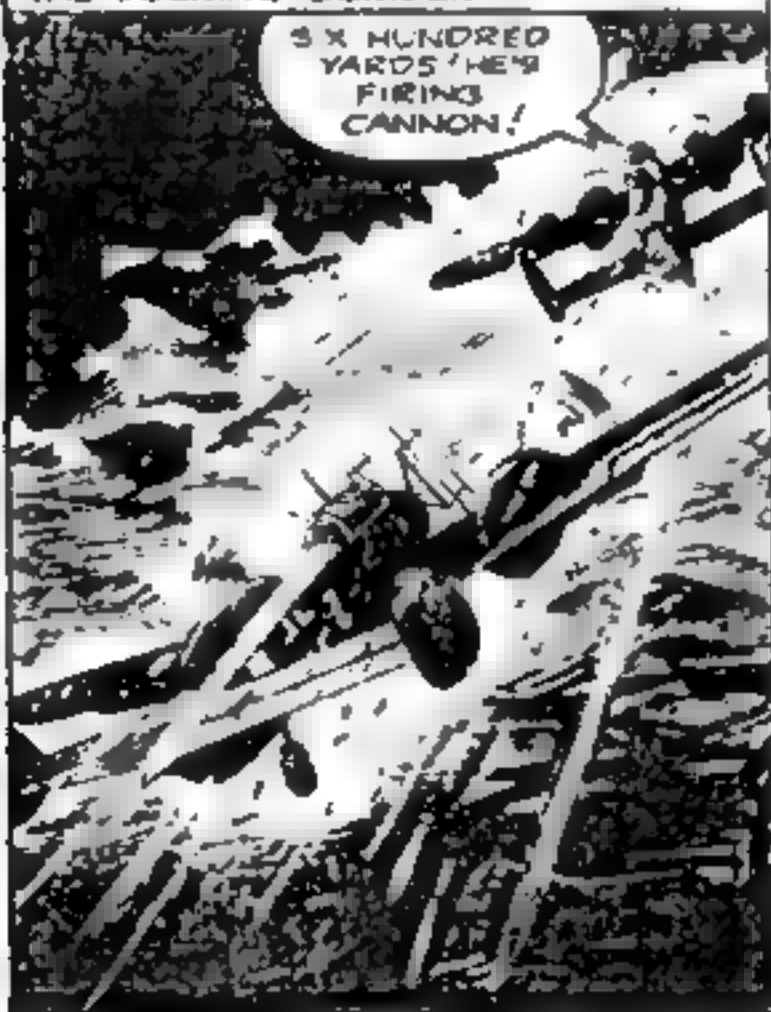
AND IT WAS NOT LUCK THAT FOCUSED THE SHARP EYES OF BEN STOTT THE COCKNEY NOSE-GUNNER IT WAS STOTT WHO SAW THE SLIM SHADOW THAT SUDDENLY BLOTTED OUT THE STARS

JERRY! A BARBED
WIRE JOB! PORT!
DIVE PORT!



A BARBED WIRE JOB! AN ME 10,
EQUIPPED WITH RADAR ANTENNAE
AND A LETHAL ARMAMENT OF
CANNONS THAT THREW DEATH AT
THE BUCKING BOMBER

3 X HUNDRED
YARDS! HE'S
FIRING
CANNON!



WEBB HAD REACTED QUICKLY TO HIS
NOSE GUNNER'S SHOUT - BUT NOT
QUICKLY ENOUGH CORDITE FUMES
FILLED THE LANCASTER'S COCKPIT AS
CANNON SHELLS CRASHED AND
KIPPED THROUGH THE CANOPY...

AGH!

BOOM!



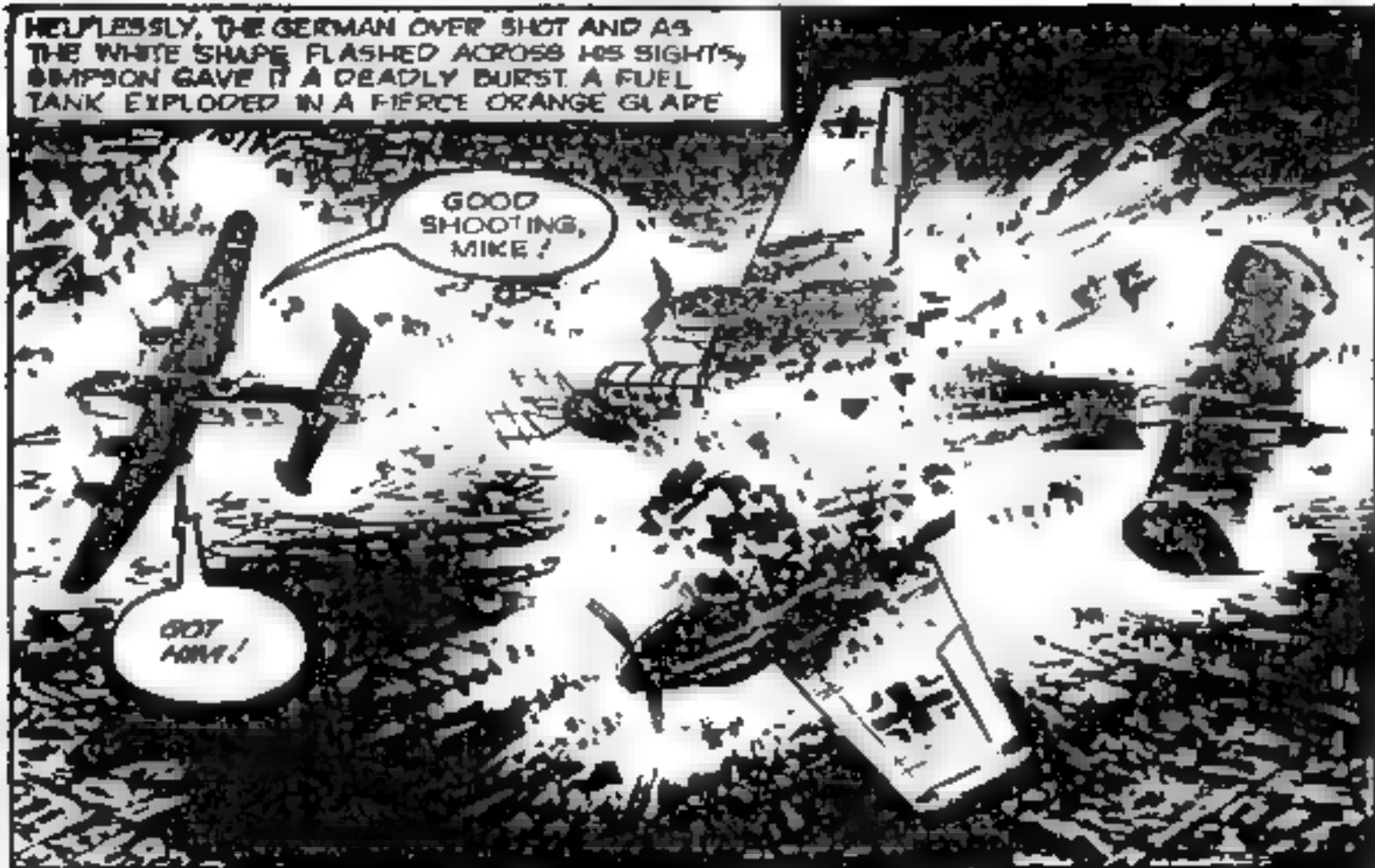
IN THE TAIL-TURRET,
THE BROWNS WERE
SWINGING URGENTLY
BEHIND THEM. MIKE
SIMPSON WAS WATCHING
THE MESSERSCHMITT AS
IT CAME IN AGAIN.

HERE
HE COMES,
SKIPPER! EIGHT
HUNDRED YARDS!
PREPARE TO
CORKSCREW!



WEBB SUDDENLY HURLED THE
LANCASTER INTO A VIOLENT,
DIVING TURN...

HELPLESSLY, THE GERMAN OVER SHOT AND AS THE WHITE SHAPE FLASHED ACROSS HIS SIGHTS, SIMPSON GAVE IT A DEADLY BURST. A FUEL TANK EXPLODED IN A FIERCE ORANGE GLARE



SUCK TIMING HAD DOWNED THE FIGHTER & FOR POPPHE TURNED AWAY FROM THE FLAMING INFERNO OF COLOGNE



EDDIE YATES *DID* MAKE IT BACK TO BASE AS HE WAS LIFTED INTO THE AMBULANCE HE GRINNED AT THE MEN WITH WHOM HE HAD SHARED DANGER AND DEATH FOR TWELVE SAVAGE MONTHS

SO LONG, BLOKES! HOPE YOU MAKE THAT SECOND TOUR!

WE'LL MAKE IT, EDDIE!

THINK OF US WHILE YOU'RE IN DOCK, EDDIE! YOU'RE DEAD LUCKY, MATE!

THEY WERE SILENT AS THEY WATCHED THE AMBULANCE PULL AWAY BILL WEBB VOICED THE THOUGHTS OF HIS SOMBRE FACED MEN

EDDIE WAS A GOOD NUT HOPE WE GET ANOTHER ENGINEER AS GOOD AS HE WAS.



ALL WEBB'S CREW DID NOT HAVE TO WAIT LONG FOR THEIR REPLACEMENT THEY WERE IN THE AIRCREW MESS, TWO DAYS LATER

JUST LISTEN TO THIS - 'ONLY ONE MAN IN THREE CAN EXPECT TO COMPLETE HIS SECOND TOUR OF OPERATIONS'

SOMEONE OUGHT TO TELL THAT NEWSPAPER ABOUT OUR LUCK!



A HARSH VOICE SUDDENLY BROKE ACROSS THEIR BANTER. THEY TURNED QUICKLY TO FACE THE TALL, BALLOW-FACED MAN WHO HAD ENTERED QUIETLY BEHIND THEM.

LUCK GENTLEMEN? THERE IS NO SUCH THING! WHEN OUR TIME COMES, THEN ALL THE LUCK IN THE WORLD WON'T SAVE US!



THE COLD ASSURANCE OF THE VOICE HAD A DISCOMFORTING EFFECT ON THE GROUP

THE NAME'S PAUL V BART-YOUR NEW FLIGHT ENGINEER! I'VE HEARD ALL ABOUT THE LUCKIEST CREW IN BOMBER COMMAND!



EVEN WEBB'S INSTINCTIVE GOOD HUMOUR WAS DISTURBED BY THE NEWCOMER'S STRANGE MANNER

GLAD TO HAVE YOU WITH US, PAUL! BUT I'M SORRY YOU THINK WE RELY TOO MUCH ON OUR LUCK! WHAT'S YOUR SUGGESTION?



VIBART SEEMED TO SMILE FROM THE POCKET OF HIS BATTLE DRESS, HE PULLED A PACK OF PLAYING CARDS

WHEN MY NUMBER COMES UP, I'LL KNOW! BECAUSE IT WILL BE ON THE CARDS!



IT WAS MIKE SIMPSON WHO SPOKE FIRST. MIKE SIMPSON, WHOSE DOGGED RELIANCE ON LUCK WAS ALMOST A SUPERSTITION

YOU MEAN YOU CAN FORETELL THE FUTURE WITH THOSE CARDS?



THAT'S RIGHT!

CAN THE CARDS TELL ME...IF I'LL COMPLETE MY SECOND TOUR OF OPS?

TAKE IT EASY, MIKE!

DISTURBED BY THE SUDDEN TENSION IN MIKE SIMPSON'S VOICE, WEBB'S INTERRUPTION WAS SHARP AND INVOLUNTARY



SUDDENLY, VIBART STIFFENED. SOMETHING LIKE FEAR FLARED IN HIS DARK EYES. MIKE SIMPSON CROAKED HARSHLY IN THE UNBEARABLE SILENCE.

WHAT DO THE CARDS SAY, VIBART? WILL I FINISH THE TOUR?



THE TIGHTNESS MELTED SUDDENLY FROM VIBART'S FACE. HE GOT UP ABRUPTLY AND HURRIEDLY PICKED UP THE CARDS.

I'M SORRY / THE SIGNS ARE CONFUSED / OR MAYBE I'M JUST NOT IN THE MOOD! SOME OTHER TIME, PERHAPS!



The Black Ace

THE TENSION CRUMBED VISIBLY AS VIBART STRODE AWAY WEBB THREW OUT A HAND AS MIKE SIMPSON MADE TO FOLLOW HIM

VIBART!
WAIT A
MINUTE!

HOLD IT
MIKE / LET
HIM GO! WE'VE
HAD ENOUGH
FAIRGROUND
MAGIC FOR
ONE NIGHT!

WEBB HAD SPOKEN MORE BRUQUELY THAN HE HAD MEANT TO HIS WORDS DREW A MILD RUMBLE OF SURPRISE FROM ABE NOLAN..

YOU DON'T TAKE THAT
FORTUNE-TELLING
STUFF SERIOUSLY
SURELY SKIPPED?

I DON'T
BELIEVE A
WORD OF IT.
ABE / BUT
VIBART DOES!
THAT'S WHAT
GIVES ME
THE CREEPS!

DURING THE NEXT FEW DAYS,
ROUTINE GUNNERY AND NIGHT-
FLYING PRACTICE HELPED THE CREW
OF *P FOR POSSE* TO FORGET THEIR
FIRST, UNEASY ENCOUNTER WITH
THEIR NEW FLIGHT ENGINEER...

YOU'VE
HIT THREE
SMOKE-FLOATS
IN A ROW!
YOU'RE REALLY
ON THE BALL
TONIGHT,
MIKE!

WEBB SOON REALISED THAT VIBART KNEW HIS JOB BUT THE ENGINEER'S PAST WAS STILL OBSCURE. WEBB TRIED TO PROBE IT WITH CASUAL CONVERSATION.

I HEAR YOU WERE ON THE MILAN SHOW WITH FIVE GROUP! PRETTY HOT, WASN'T IT?


IT WAS HOT, ALL RIGHT! I SUPPOSE YOUR CREW WOULD SAY THAT I WAS LUCKY..

THE SARCASM WAS HEAVY IN VIBART'S VOICE. WEBB DID NOT SPEAK AS HE TURNED THE LANCASTER INTO LANDING ORBIT ABOVE THE AIRFIELD. IT WAS JOHNNO MARTIN'S SUDDEN WARNING THAT JERKED HIM FROM HIS ANGRY SILENCE.

WATCH IT, SKIPPER! THERE'S A KITE DEAD AHEAD WITHOUT NAVIGATION LIGHTS! MUST BE A SPROG PILOT!

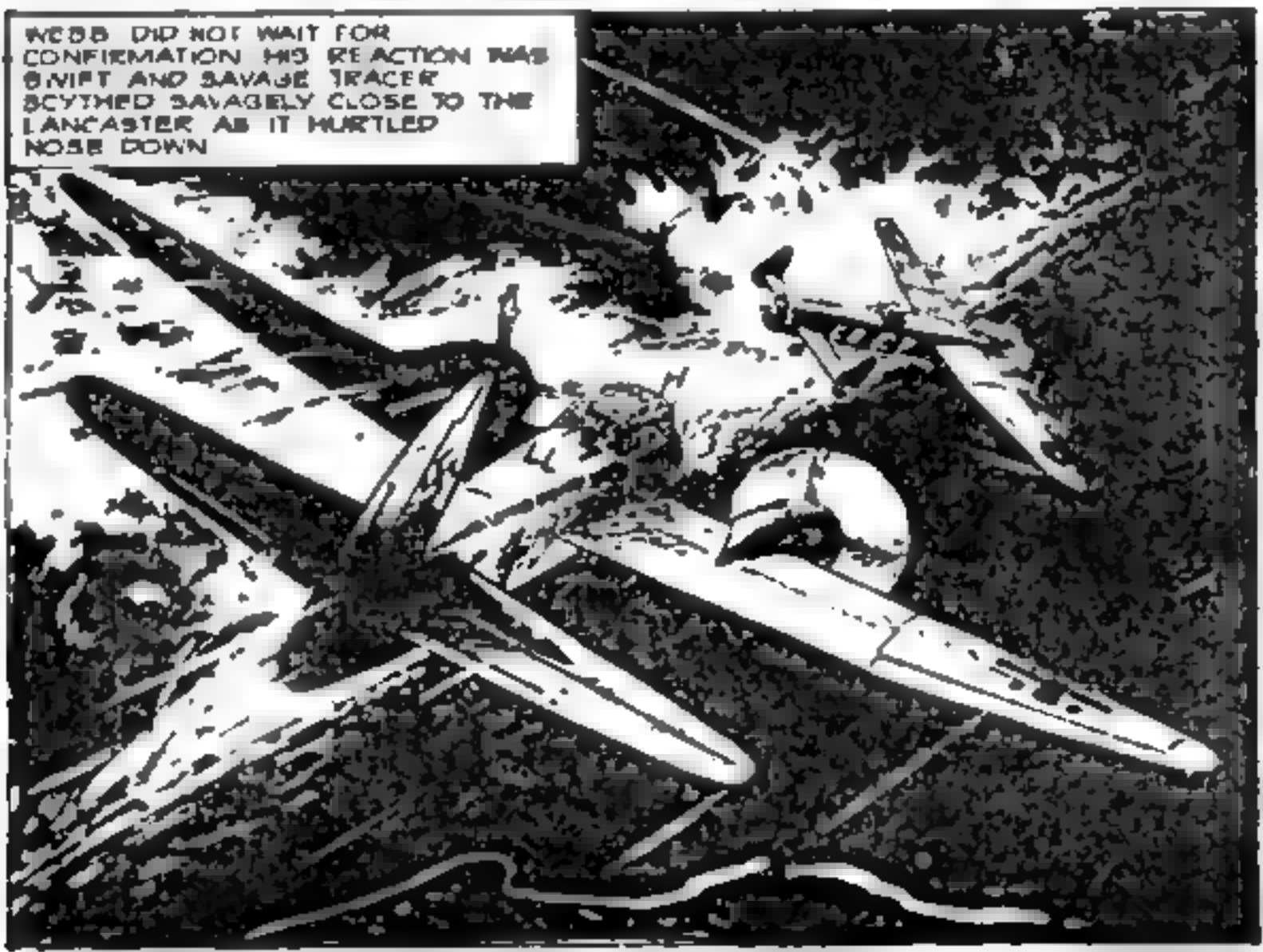


PIERCELY, WEBB'S EYES PROBED THE STARRY BACKDROP OF THE NIGHT. SUDDENLY, HE SAW THE FLOATING BLACK SHAPE ABOVE HIM—JUST AS PAUL VIBART SHOUTED A WARNING.



THAT'S
NO TRAINING
SHIP! IT'S A
JUNKER'S EIGHTY-
EIGHT—AND IT'S
ATTACKING!
LIVE!

WEBB DID NOT WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION. HIS REACTION WAS SWIFT AND SAVAGE. TRACER SCYTHED SAVAGELY CLOSE TO THE LANCASTER AS IT HURTTLED NOSE DOWN.

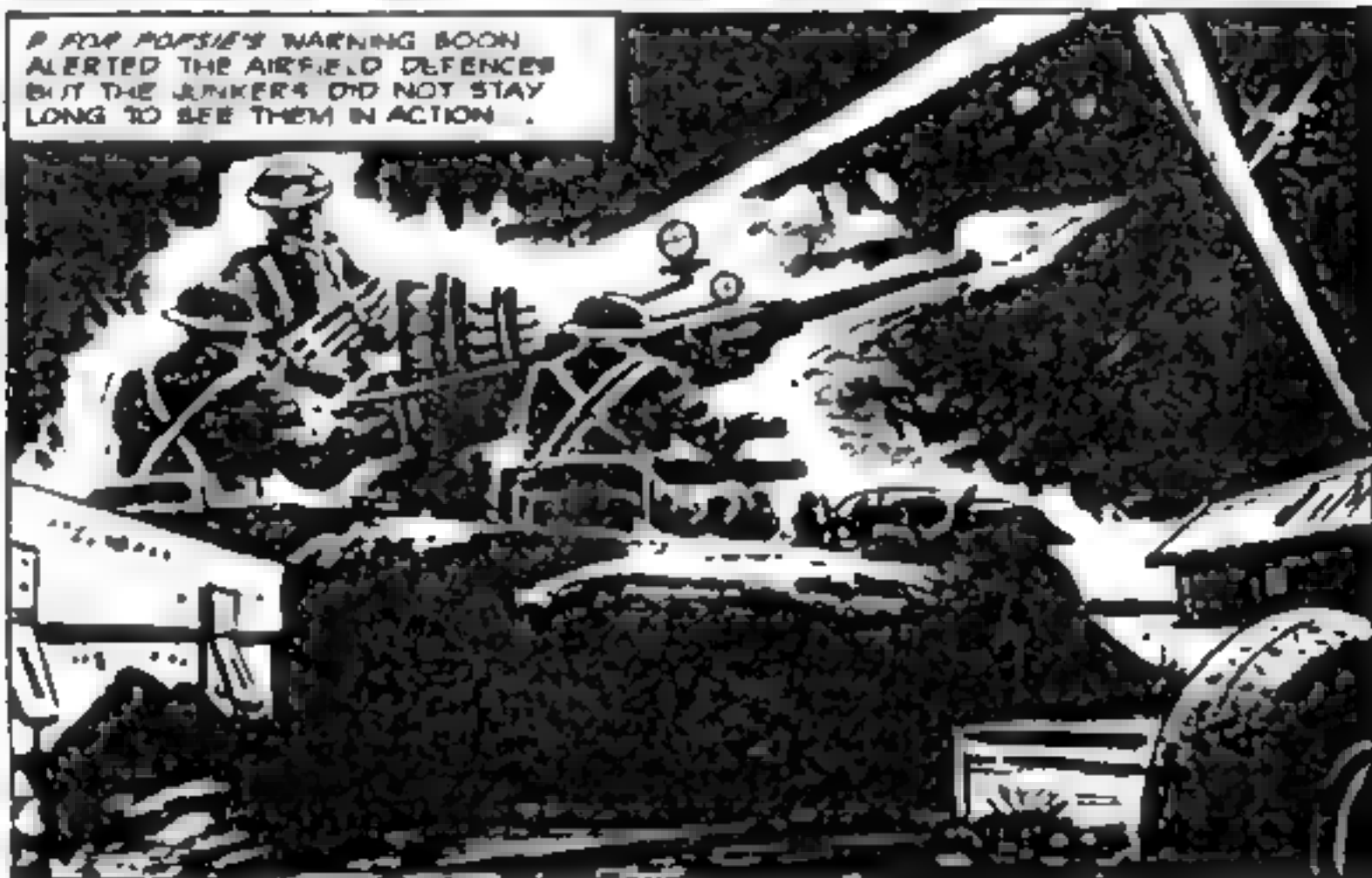


IT WAS A CLOSE THING P FDR
POPSIE SHOT AT FULL THROTTLE
ACROSS THE FLARING LIGHTS OF
THE RUNWAY...

TELL
CONTROL THERE'S
A JERRY INTRUDER
WAITING TO AMBUSH
OUR KITES AS
THEY COME IN!

OKAY
SKIPPER!

P FDR POPSIE'S WARNING SOON
ALERTED THE AIRFIELD DEFENCES
BUT THE JUNKERS DID NOT STAY
LONG TO SEE THEM IN ACTION.



AT LAST, WEBB
BOUGHT THE
LANCASTER
DOWN SAFELY.
HIS VOICE
WAS A LITTLE
SHAKY AS
HE SPOKE
TO PAUL
VIBART...

THAT WAS DICEY,
PAUL! HOW DID YOU
SPOT THAT JUNKER?
SO QUICKLY?

I'VE GOT
AN INSTINCT
FOR DANGER,
SHOPPER!



MIKE SIMPSON HAD FORGOTTEN VIBART'S STRANGE
REPLY BY THE TIME THEY REACHED THE CREW
ROOM. THE TAIL GUNNER SAW THEIR NARROW
ESCAPE IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT



YOU SAVED US,
DIDN'T YOU, MONTY,
LAD? THAT JERRY
PILOT HADN'T A HOPE
OF SHOOTING DOWN
THE LUCKIEST CREW
IN BOMBER COMMAND

VIBART MOVED SWIFTLY MIKE SIMPSON YELLED AS THE TOY BEAR WAS SNATCHED FROM HIS HAND

HEY! MY MASCOT!

YOUR PITIFUL SYMBOL OF LUCK! GROW UP, SIMPSON! A TOY BEAR WON'T HELP YOU!

THEY STOOD IN FROZEN ASTONISHMENT AS VIBART JERKED THE LID OFF THE STOVE

SUPPOSE I BURNED YOUR LUCKY CHARM-DO YOU THINK YOU'D DIE, SIMPSON? IS THAT WHAT YOU BELIEVE? IS IT?

VIBART! DON'T!

BILL WEBB DID NOT WAIT TO FIND OUT IF VIBART WOULD CARRY OUT HIS THREAT HIS HAND CLAMPED LIKE AN ANGRY VICE ON THE ENGINEER'S WRIST

ALL RIGHT, VIBART! COOL DOWN! HERE, MIKE - TAKE YOUR MASCOT!

GIVE HIM BACK HIS TOY, THEN, WEBB! BUT IT WON'T PROTECT HIM FROM THE FIRST SHELL THAT'S GOT HIS NAME ON IT!

VIBART'S MOCKING VOICE MOVED THE EASY-GOING ABE NOLAN TO A SUDDEN OUTBURST OF ANGER

LEAVE HIM ALONE VIBART / THOSE CARDS YOU CARRY ARE JUST ANOTHER SUPERSTITION ANYWAY / MAYBE THEY CAN TELL US IF WE'RE GOING TO GET THE CHOP TOMORROW NIGHT?



NOLAN'S CHALLENGE WAS HALF HEARTED, BUT VIBART SEIZED ON IT THE PACK OF CARDS WAS IN HIS HANDS BEFORE ALL WERE COULD MOVE

ALL RIGHT / WE'LL PICK TWO CARDS AND SEE WHAT THEY TELL US / YOU FIRST, SIMPSON!



BILL WEBB WATCHED SIMPSON TAKE A CARD. THE TAIL-GUNNER HISSED SHARPLY AS HE TURNED ITS FACE TO THE LIGHT...

IT...
IT'S THE
ACE OF
SPADES!

IN MOST CARD GAMES THE ACE OF SPADES IS A USEFUL CARD TO HOLD. IN FORTUNE TELLING- IT IS THE CARD OF DEATH!

NO ONE MOVED AS VISART SLOWLY SHUFFLED THE PACK. HE OFFERED THE CARDS TO ABE NOLAN.

NOW YOU,
NOLAN! YOU
STARTED
THIS!

A LANCASTER ZOOMED OVERHEAD AS THE NAVIGATOR SLOWLY PICKED A CARD. THE SOUND ALMOST DROWNED HIS MUFFLED WORDS...

IT'S AN EIGHT.

AN EIGHT / GOOD GRIP / THAT'S THE SERIAL NUMBER OF OUR KTB / FIRST THE ACE, NOW THIS / WE'RE ALL GOING TO BE KILLED!



THE HARSH VOICE OF BILL WEBB CUT ACROSS MIKE SIMPSON'S HYSTERICAL OUTBURST.

I WANT TO BE IN ON THIS VIBART. LET ME PICK A CARD!

NO, SKIPPER / YOU'LL SPOT IT...



BUT WEBB TOOK NO NOTICE, HE RIPPED A CARD FROM THE PACK AND FLUNG IT ON THE TABLE...

IT'S THE JOKER! IN FACT, THE WHOLE THING'S NOTHING BUT A GREAT BIG JOKE! THAT'S RIGHT, ISN'T IT, VIBART?



VIBART MADE NO REPLY...

IT'S EASY TO LAUGH AT VIBART, SKIPPER! BUT WHAT IF HIS CARDS ARE RIGHT?



CUT IT OUT MIKE! REMEMBER- WE'RE THE LUCKIEST CREW IN BOMBER COMMAND!

Chapter 3. *Figure of Fate*

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, P FOR POPSIE FLEW WITH A FORCE OF 700 BOMBERS TO ATTACK THE DIESEL-ENGINE FACTORIES OF DUSSELDORF. HER CREW HAD ONE THING ON THEIR MINDS - V-BART AND THE FATAL PROPHECY OF HIS CARDS.



ENEMY COAST, SKIPPER!

THEY CROSSED THE DUTCH COAST AT 9000 FEET, EACH MAN NURSING HIS UNSPOKEN DOUBT.

FLAK SHIP, SKIPPER!

OKAY, MIKE! IT'S GUNNERS ARE WAY OFF, AS USUAL.

VIBART SAT BEHIND HIS THROTTLES LIKE A TENSE SILENT SHADOW UNNEERING A CREW THAT HAD FOUGHT THROUGH SOME OF THE BLOODIEST AIR BATTLES OF THE RUHR

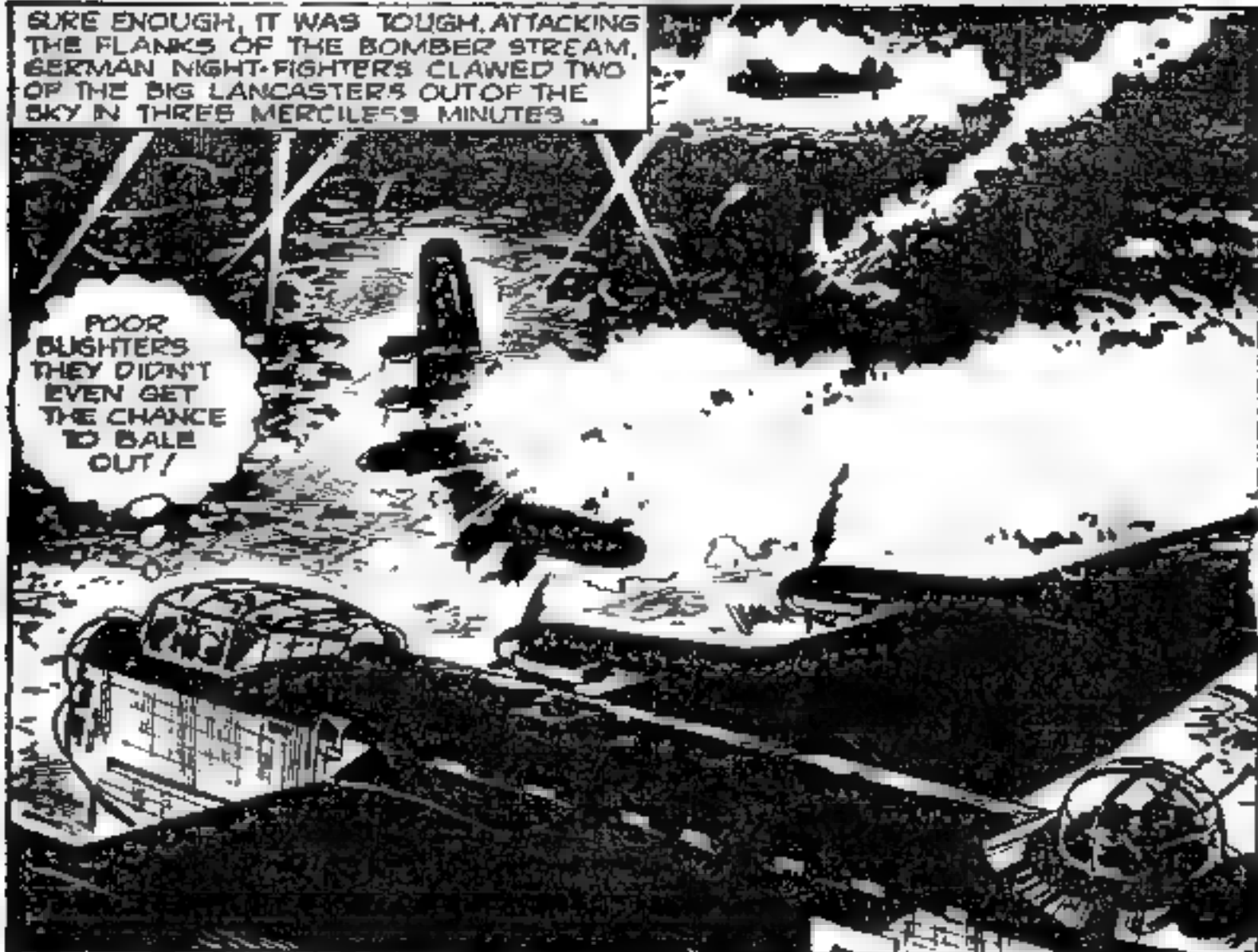
WHY DOESN'T HE SPEAK IT'S AS IF HE'S WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN!

AHEAD OF THEM THEY SAW THE GREEN TARGET-MARKERS GOING DOWN IN BETWEEN, FLICKED THE RED VIOLET FLASHES THAT THREW A RESTLESS WALL ACROSS THE NIGHT

BARRAGE FLAK / IT'S GOING TO BE TOUGH GOING /

SURE ENOUGH, IT WAS TOUGH. ATTACKING THE FLANKS OF THE BOMBER STREAM, GERMAN NIGHT-FIGHTERS CLAWED TWO OF THE BIG LANCASTERS OUT OF THE SKY IN THREE MERCILESS MINUTES.

POOR BLIGHTERS
THEY DIDN'T
EVEN GET
THE CHANCE
TO BALE
OUT!

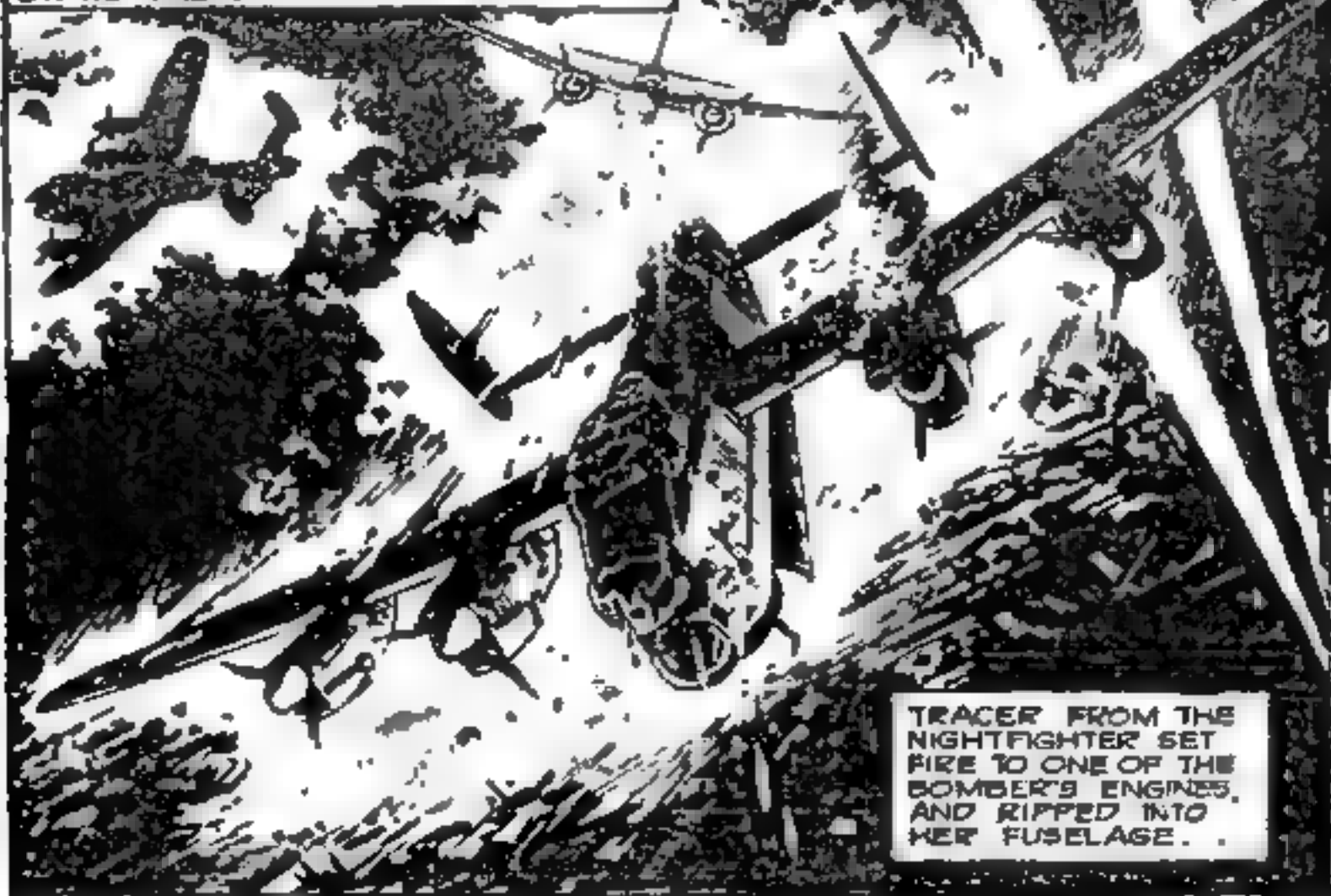


POPSIE'S ENTIRE CREW NOW SENSED THE THREAT THAT HUNG OVER THEM. THEY ALMOST JUMPED WHEN DEN STOTT'S VOICE CRACKLED HARSHLY ON THE INTERCOM.

NIGHT-
FIGHTER!
THREE
O'CLOCK!
DIVE TO
PORT!

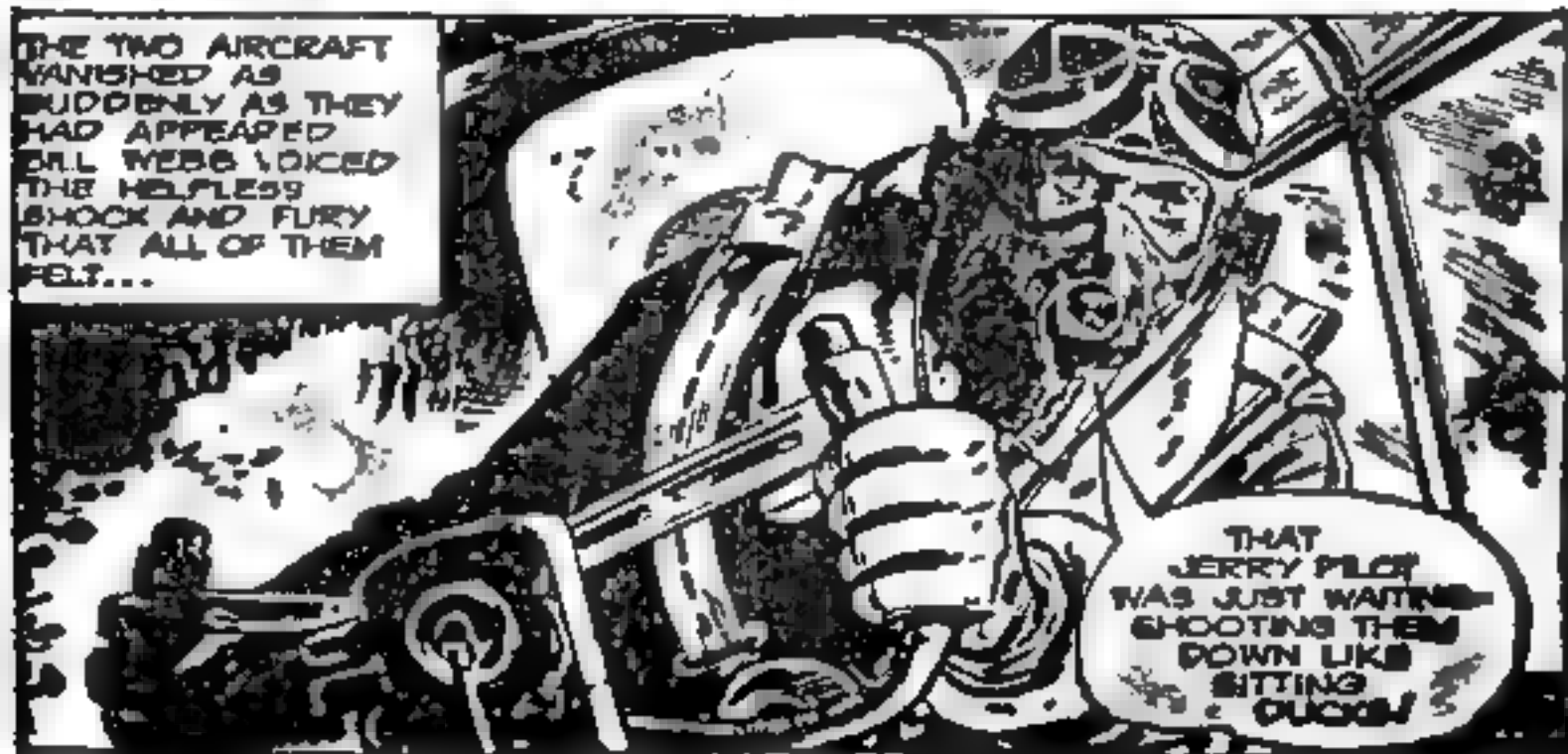


THE CREW OF P FOR POPPE HAD ESCAPED DEATH BY THE SKIN OF THEIR TEETH. THE NEXT LANCASTER WAS NOT SO LUCKY. IT DIVED FRANTICALLY WITH A JUNKER'S EIGHTY-EIGHT SITTING ON ITS TAIL.



TRACER FROM THE NIGHTFIGHTER SET FIRE TO ONE OF THE BOMBER'S ENGINES, AND RIPPED INTO HER FUSELAGE.

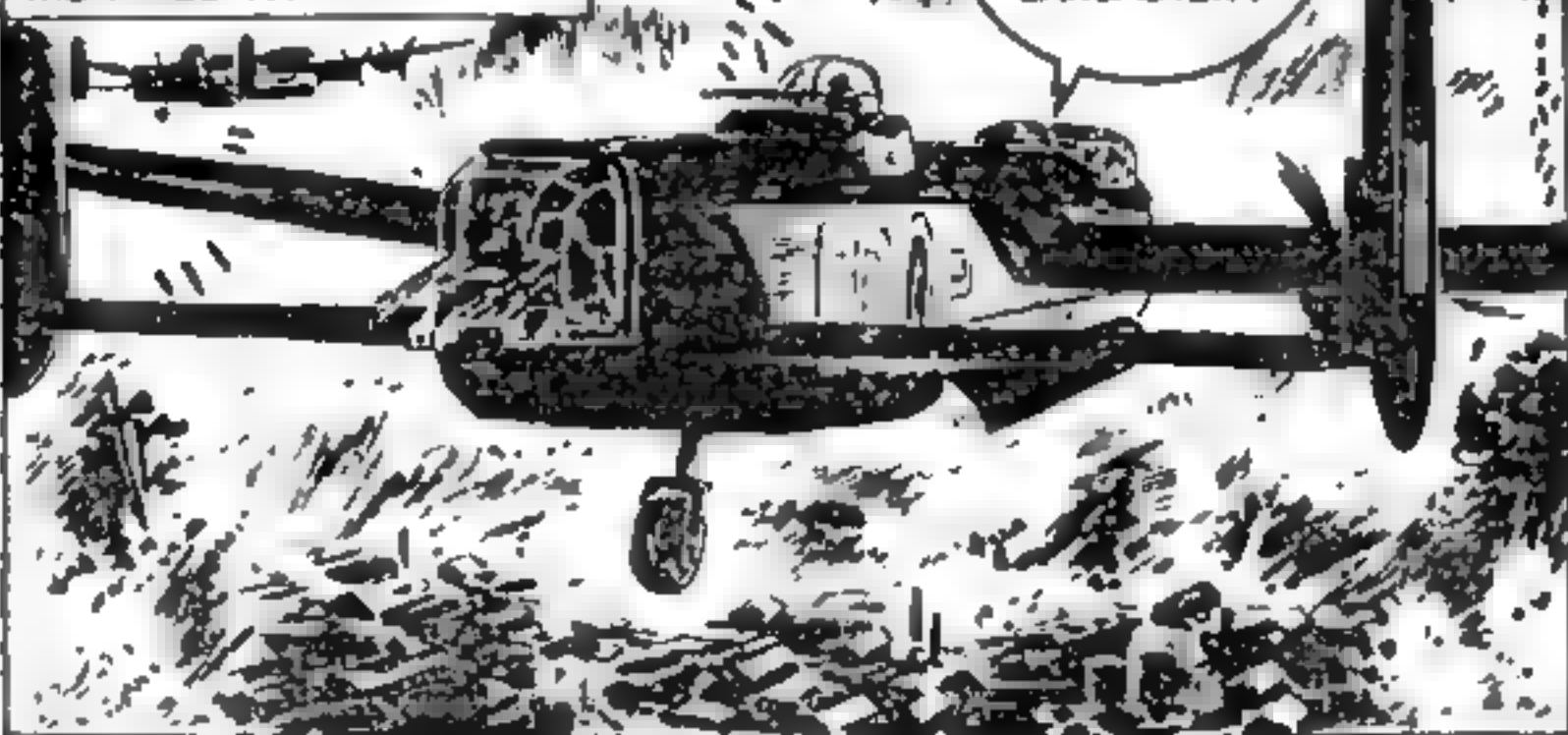
THE TWO AIRCRAFT VANISHED AS SUDDENLY AS THEY HAD APPEARED. BILL WEBB LOOKED THE HELPLESS SHOCK AND FURY THAT ALL OF THEM FELT...



THAT JERRY PILOT WAS JUST WAITING SHOOTING THEM DOWN LIKE SITTING DUCKS!

THEY SUDDENLY FORGOT ABOUT PAUL VIBART'S CARDS, AND THE OMNINOUS FIGURE EIGHT ON A FOR POPPIE'S FUSELAGE, AS WEBB BEGAN HIS STRAIGHT, FIFTEEN MILE RUN-UP TO THE TARGET...

OPENING BOMB-DOORS NOW, JOHNNY! LET'S GET EVEN WITH THE JERRIES FOR THE BOYS IN THAT LANCASTER!

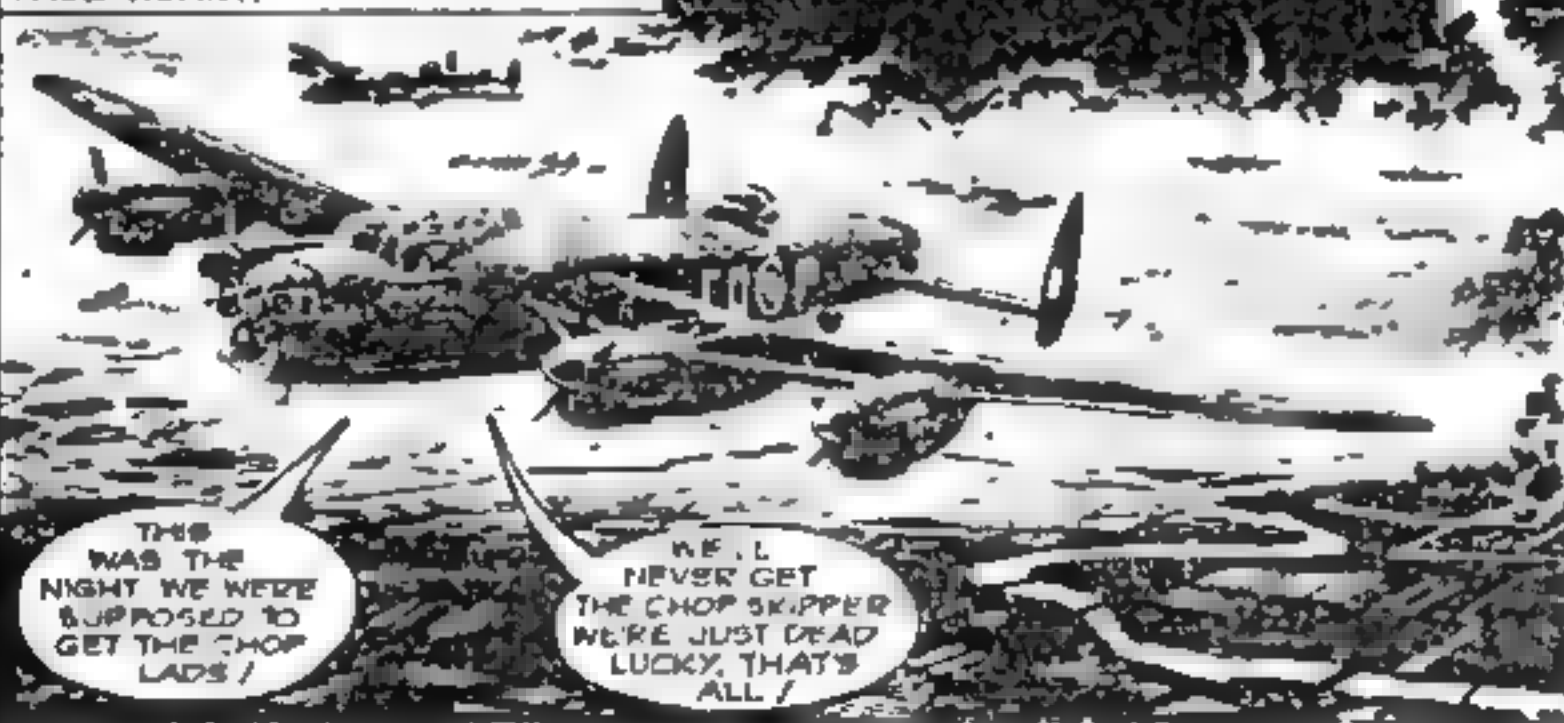


THE CREW WORKED WITH THEIR USUAL SMOOTH EFFICIENCY WEBB JUDGED HEIGHT AND SPEED PERFECTLY JOHNNY MARTIN DROPPED HIS BOMBS PLUMB ON THE TARGET-MARKERS ..



BELOW THEM, THE GERMAN FACTORY DISSOLVED IN A VICIOUS WELTER OF FLAME AND STEEL..

THEY REACHED THE TURNING-POINT WITHOUT SEEING ANY MORE FIGHTERS. AS HE SET COURSE FOR HOME, WEBB SUDDENLY THOUGHT ABOUT PAUL VIBART.



THIS WAS THE NIGHT WE WERE SUPPOSED TO GET THE CHOP LADS!

WE'LL NEVER GET THE CHOP SKIPPER WE'RE JUST DEAD LUCKY, THAT'S ALL!

THREE HOURS LATER P FOR POPSIE HAD COMPLETED HER FIFTY-NINTH OPERATION. AS HER CREW STOOD WAITING IN THE DARKNESS FOR THE FLIGHT TRUCK BILL WEBB SPOKE QUIETLY TO HIS SILENT ENGINEER

WELL PAUL / WE MADE IT AGAIN / WAS IT LUCK - OR WERE YOUR CARDS WRONG?



VIBART SHRUGGED IMPERCEPTIBLY BUT SAID NOTHING

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, MOST OF P FOR POPSIE'S CREW ATE A LATE BREAKFAST IN THE MESS



WELL WE PRANGED THE TARGET LAST NIGHT, DAVE!

SURE BILL BUT OUR LOSSES WERE PRETTY HEAVY - EIGHT KITES SHOT DOWN!

A FORK CLATTERED LOUDLY ON THE TABLE-TOP. IT HAD FALLEN FROM THE TREMBLING HAND OF MIKE SIMPSON ..

EIGHT KITES! DON'T YOU SEE? THAT WAS THE NUMBER OF THE CARD WE DREW FROM VIBART'S PACK!



IN THE STUNNED SILENCE THAT FOLLOWED, VIBART'S VOICE SOUNDED QUIET, BUT TRIUMPHANT ..

THE CARDS WERE RIGHT, SKIPPER! AND PERHAPS THEY WERE MOCKING US ALL THE TIME / IT WAS YOU WHO PICKED THE JOKER /



VIBART LEFT BEFORE ANYONE COULD SPEAK BUT MIKE SIMPSON HAD BEEN DEEPLY IMPRESSED BY THE NEWS HE HAD HEARD ..

WE PICKED AN ACE OF SPADES, THEN AN EIGHT / AND EIGHT OF OUR KITES GET THE CHOP

SNAP OUT OF IT, MIKE / THE WHOLE THING'S JUST A COINCIDENCE /

MOST OF THEM WERE READY TO BELIEVE THAT IT WAS A COINCIDENCE BUT MIKE SIMPSON WAS NOT CONVINCED ALMOST BLINDLY HE STUMBLED IN PURSUIT OF THE ANSWER.

VIBART'S RIGHT / PERHAPS IT'S OUR TURN TONIGHT / I'VE GOT TO KNOW!

MIKE! COME BACK!



BILL WEBB WAS RIGHT, ON THE TAIL-GUNNER'S HEELS AS HE BURST INTO PAUL VIBART'S ROOM...

VIBART.. THE CARDS / WHAT DO THEY SAY ABOUT TONIGHT? I'VE GOT TO KNOW!

NO, MIKE! DON'T BE A FOOL!



AGAIN, WEBB SAW THE STRANGE, MOCKING TRIUMPH ON VIBART'S FACE AS THE FLIGHT-ENGINEER GATHERED UP HIS CARDS...

WHAT'S THE MATTER, SKIPPER? DON'T SAY THE CARDS HAVE GOT YOU WORRIED?



WEBB WAS WORRIED - NOT BY VIBART'S CARDS, BUT BY THE WAY HIS CREW HAD REACTED TO THEM HE STRUGGLED HARD TO KEEP THE CONTEMPT FROM HIS VOICE.

ALL RIGHT VIBART! I RECKON THIS FORTUNE-TELLING LARK IS PHONEY - AND TO PROVE IT, I'LL DRAW TWO CARDS!



QUICKLY, IMPATIENTLY
WEBB DREW THE FIRST
CARD ITS APPEARANCE
BROUGHT A SPASM OF
FEAR TO SEVERAL FACES
IN THE ROOM.

IT'S
THE ACE
OF SPADES
AGAIN!

THE
DEATH
CARD!



WEBB FOUGHT DOWN
THE SHOCK HE FELT
HE WHIRLED TOWARDS
HIS CREW, CONTEMPT
SEETHING OPENLY
IN HIS VOICE

OKAY I'LL
DRAW AGAIN!
IF IT'S AN EIGHT
THEN TONIGHT WE GET
THE CHOP, BECAUSE
EIGHTS THE NUMBER OF
OUR KITE BUT IT
WOULDN'T BE AN
EIGHT!



NO ONE UTTERED A WORD AS WEBB RIPPED ANOTHER CARD FROM THE PACK. HE LOOKED AT IT-THEN THREW IT DOWN ON VIBART'S BED IN SAVAGE TRIUMPH ..

NOW DO YOU BELIEVE ME? IT'S A SEVEN- AND POPSY'S NUMBER IS EIGHT IT CAN'T POSSIBLY MEAN WE'RE GETTING THE CHOP TONIGHT!



DISGUSTEDLY, WEBB MADE FOR THE DOOR BUT THE FLAT, EMOTIONLESS VOICE OF VIBART HALTED HIM.

YOU'RE WRONG, SKIPPER! THE CARDS DON'T LIE. I'VE JUST SEEN THE FITTERS CHANGING POPSY'S SERIAL NUMBER- FROM EIGHT... TO SEVEN!



MR. IMPSON
ALMOST PLUNGED
FROM THE ROOM
THE OTHERS FOLLOWED
HIM BEFORE WEBB
COULD MOVE. HIS
FURIOUS ROAR WAS
UTTERLY IGNORED.

COME
BACK! HE'S
LYING!



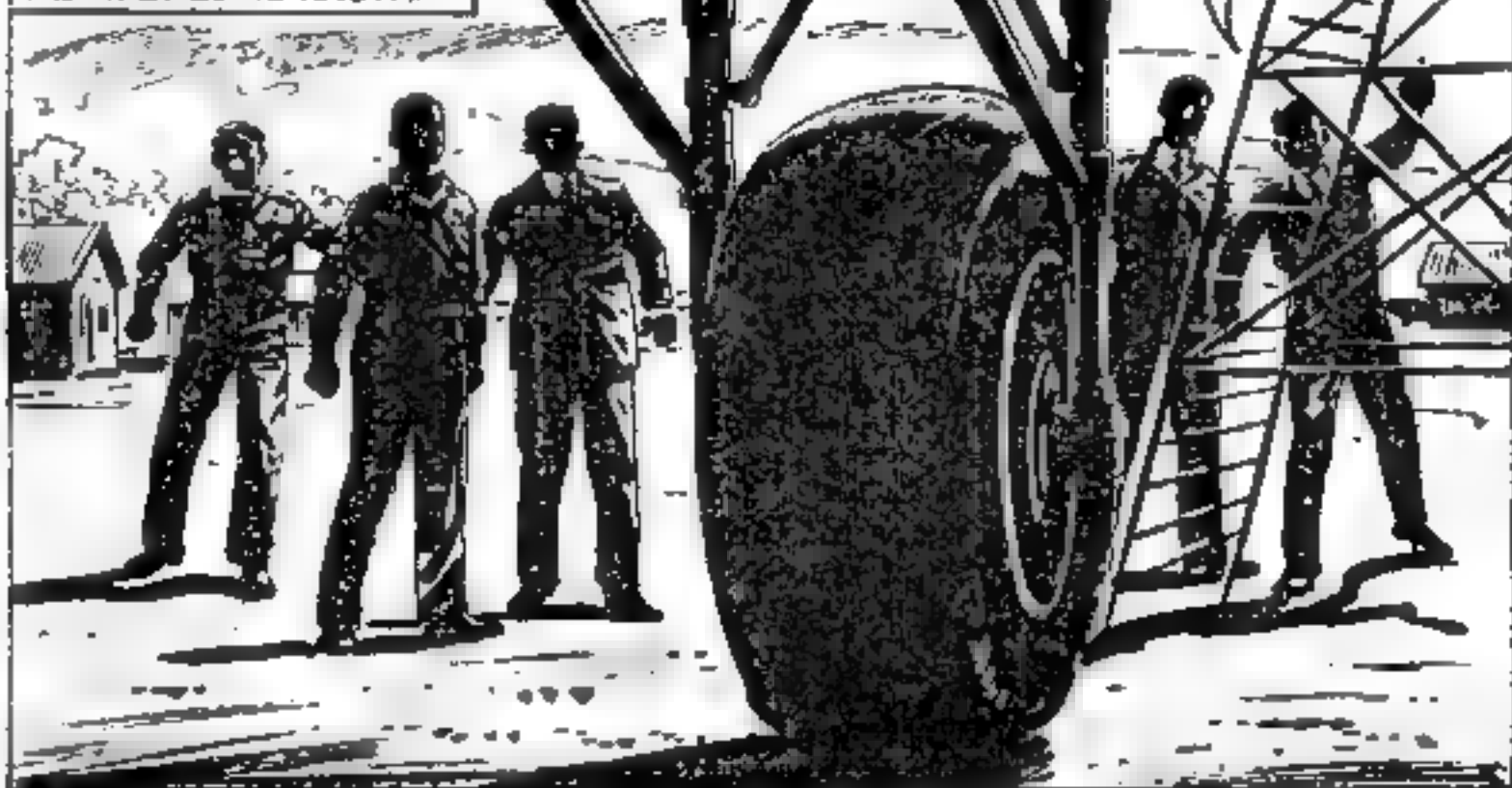
THEY WERE HEADING LONG BEFORE
HE CAUGHT THEM UP. HIS
MIND RECOILED FROM THE
TERRIFYING MEANING OF
PAUL VIBART'S WORDS

VIBART'S
LYING / HE'S
GOT TO
BE...

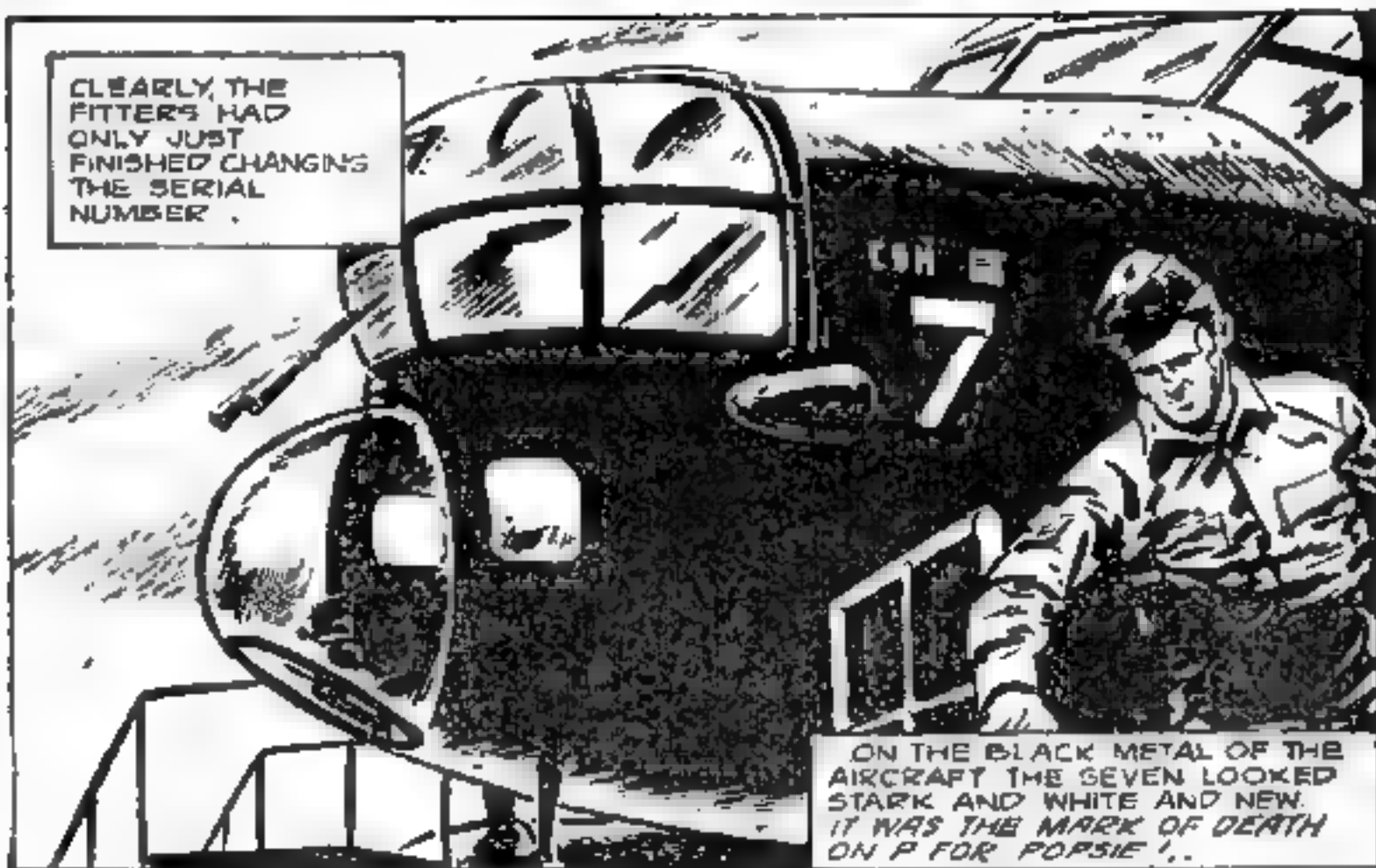


WEBB BURST PAST THE FROZEN FIGURES OF HIS CREW MIKE SIMPSON'S HUSHED VOICE TOLD HIM ALL HE NEEDED TO KNOW.

VIBART WAS RIGHT, SKIPPER! LOOK!



CLEARLY, THE FITTERS HAD ONLY JUST FINISHED CHANGING THE SERIAL NUMBER.



ON THE BLACK METAL OF THE AIRCRAFT THE SEVEN LOOKED STARK AND WHITE AND NEW. IT WAS THE MARK OF DEATH ON P FOR PORSIE!..

TIMELESS SECONDS PASSED BEFORE WEBB FOUND WORDS TO SPEAK. HE ALMOST SNARLED AT THE FLIGHT-SERGEANT FITTER IN CHARGE!

WHAT'S GOING ON CHIEF? WHY HAVE YOU CHANGED THE NUMBER?

ORDERS FROM GROUP, SIR! THERE WERE TWO LANCS WITH THE SAME SERIAL NUMBER! WE WERE TOLD TO CHANGE POPSIE THIS MORNING!



IT WAS A MILLION-TO-ONE CHANCE. FOR A YEAR THEY HAD BEEN FLYING AROUND WITH THE WRONG NUMBER DESPERATELY. WEBB WHIRLED ON HIS CREW

THIS IS JUST A MANUFACTURER'S MISTAKE, BLOKES! IT DOESN'T MEAN A THING!



BUT, FOR MIKE SIMPSON, IT WAS ONE COINCIDENCE TOO MANY FOR HIM, A PACK OF CARDS HAD DEALT A HAND WITHOUT HOPE

NO, SKIPPER! YOU DREW THE CARDS YOURSELF! FIRST THE ACE OF SPADES THEN THE SEVEN! IT'S OUR TURN TONIGHT!

STOP IT, MIKE! PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!

WEBB WALKED AWAY FROM THE WHITE-FACED TAIL-GUNNER HE FOUND HIS EYES RIVETED ON THE STARK WHITE SEVEN ON P FOR POPSIE'S NOSE...

IT'S CRAZY! I WISH I'D NEVER SET EYES ON VIBART AND HIS CARDS! BUT MAYBE WE WON'T BE ON OPS TONIGHT...

Chapter 4. *Error of Judgment*

THERE WAS OPERATIONAL FLYING IN STORE FOR P F P FOR THE THAT NIGHT THE TARGET WAS A IRRE ENGINEERING BY RKS AT DORTMUND VITAL TO THE GERMAN WAR EFFORT THE MASSED AIRCREWS WERE BRIEFED BY THE SQUADRON COMMANDER.

THERE ARE HEAVY FLAK BATTERIES ALONG THE ROUTE BUT YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO AVOID THEM WITH GOOD NAVIGATION

THE WAITING BETWEEN DOING AND TAKE OFF WAS NEVER PLEASANT FOR BILL WEBB'S CREW THAT NIGHT IT WAS MORE LIKE TORTURE.

THEY'VE FACED DEATH A HUNDRED TIMES AND JOKED ABOUT IT / BUT NOW THEY'VE GOT THE JITTERS OVER A PACK OF CARDS!

TWO CARDS, PICKED AT RANDOM, HAD CHANGED A TOUGH, VETERAN CREW INTO A TEAM OF NERVOUS, WORRIED MEN. EVEN THE EYES OF ABE NOLAN HELD A RESTLESS SHADOW OF DOUBT.

SURELY THIS HASN'T RATTLED YOU, ABE?

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY SKIPPER / IT JUST SEEMS A FANTASTIC CONFIDENCE. MAYBE THERE IS SOMETHING IN IT.



WEBB'S FIRST CHANCE TO SPEAK TO VIBART CAME AS THEY WERE OWNING IN THE CREW-ROOM.

LET ME CALL ANYTHING HAPPENS TONIGHT VIBART I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF THIS FORTUNE TELLING TRIBE.

HAVE IT YOUR OWN WAY SKIPPER BUT WE'LL KNOW FOR SURE IN SIX HOURS' TIME /



AT 8 PM, THE AIRCREWS WALKED OUT TO THE WAITING FLIGHT TRUCKS. P FOR POPP'S CREW WAS NORMALLY A TALKATIVE, HAPPY BUNCH, BUT THIS NIGHT THEY WALKED IN A KNOT OF TIGHT-LIPPED SILENCE . .

IF ONLY SOMETHING WOULD GO WRONG WITH OUR KITE, SO THAT WE'D HAVE TO TAKE THE SPARE / ANYTHING TO GET AWAY FROM THAT CONFOUNDED SEVEN /

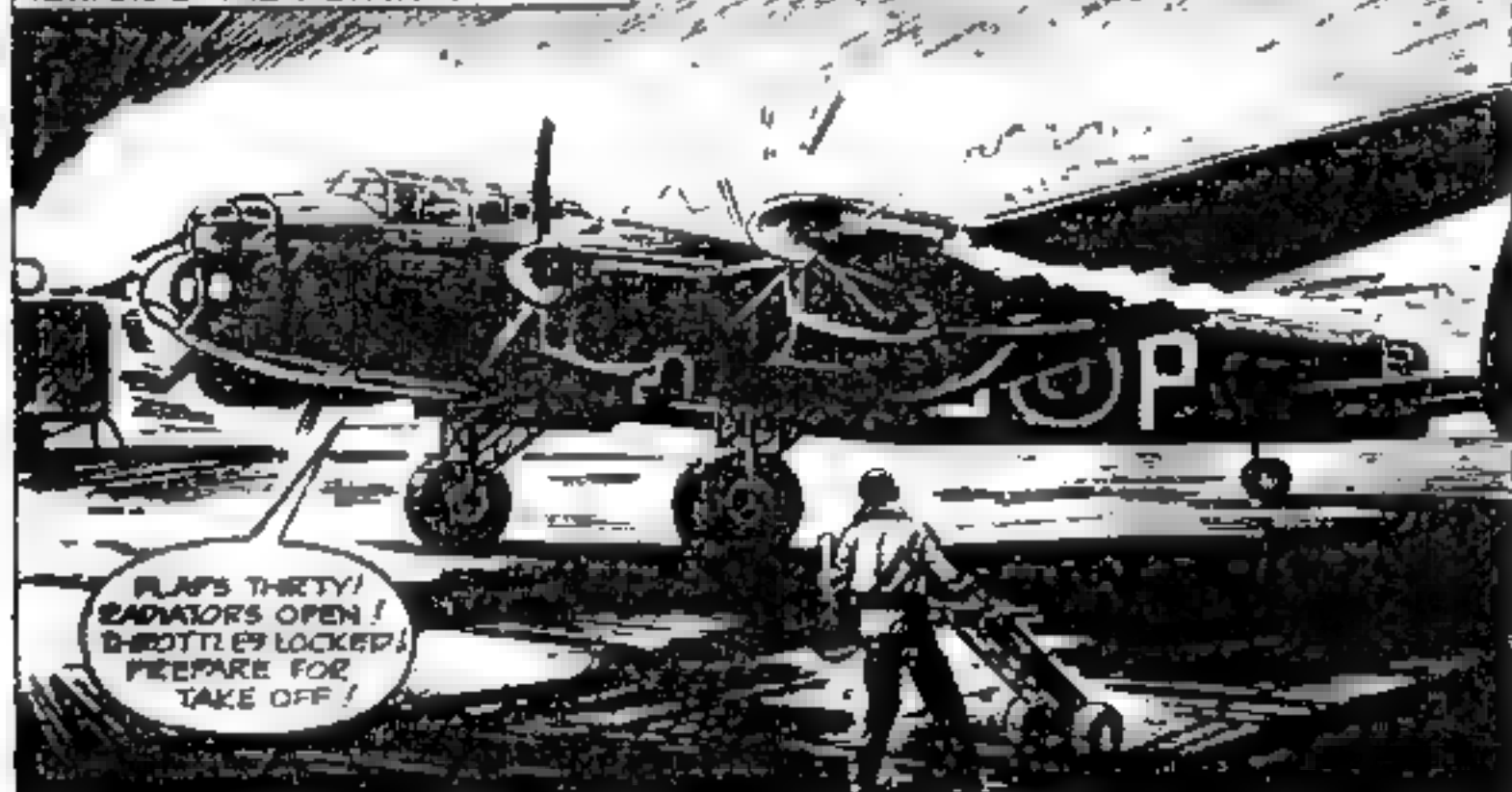


BUT THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH P FOR POPP'S WEBB SIGNED FOR A MACHINE IN PERFECT CONDITION AT LAST HE SETTLED DOWN BEHIND THE CONTROLS

ALL RIGHT, VIBART / LET'S GET THIS KITE IN THE AIR /



WEBB PUNCHED THE BUTTONS OF THE BOOSTER COILS THE ENGINES WHINED AND SPUN EXPLOSIVELY P FOR POPPIE WADDLED FORWARD AND SWUNG HER NOSE TOWARDS THE NORTH.



FLAPS THIRTY!
RADIATORS OPEN!
BOTTLES LOCKED!
PREPARE FOR
TAKE OFF!

THE BLARE OF THE MERLIN ENGINES GLAMMED ACROSS THE FIELD AS P FOR POPPIE ROLLED FORWARD IT WAS AS THE LANCASTER LEFT THE GROUND THAT A THOUGHT STRUCK WEBB WITH STUNNING FORCE..

GOOD GRIEF!
I'VE JUST
REALISED! WE'RE
THE SEVENTH
CREW TO
TAKE OFF!



The Black Ace

THE SUN WAS LOW BEHIND THEM AS THEY TURNED SLOWLY ON COURSE - SEVEN MEN WHO SAT IN THE COLD SHADOW OF A PROPHECY, AND ONE WHO STRUGGLED TO REJECT IT WITH EVERY FIBRE OF HIS BODY ...

LET'S HOPE NOTHING GOES WRONG BEFORE WE REACH THE TARGET / THE REST OF THE BLOKES WILL RECKON IT'S SOME KIND OF OMEN /

BUT THEY REACHED THE RENDEZVOUS POINT ON TIME. DEAD ON COURSE, THE GREAT BomBER STREAM RUMBLED ACROSS HOLLAND AND FORGED ON TOWARDS THE RUHR VALLEY

AHEAD OF THEM, THE PATHFINDER'S WERE ALREADY DROPPING THE SKY-MARKERS THAT WOULD PINPOINT THE TARGETS FOR THE HIGH EXPLOSIVE THAT WAS TO FOLLOW.

WEBB WAS STILL THINKING OF A FOUR POSITION CHANGE OF NUMBER AS THEY CRUISED THE RHINE IT WAS THEN THAT A CRAZY VIBARTS CLATTER CAME FROM THE STARBOARD OUTER ENGINE

RUNAWAY AIRSCREW! FEATHER IT VIBART! QUICK MAN!

HE'S TALKING ON VIBART'S PART COULD HAVE BEEN FATAL BUT THE ENGINEER WAS QUICK TO PRESS THE STOP-BUTTON OF THE STARBOARD OUTER THE GREAT SLASHING BLADES FROZE ABRUPTLY

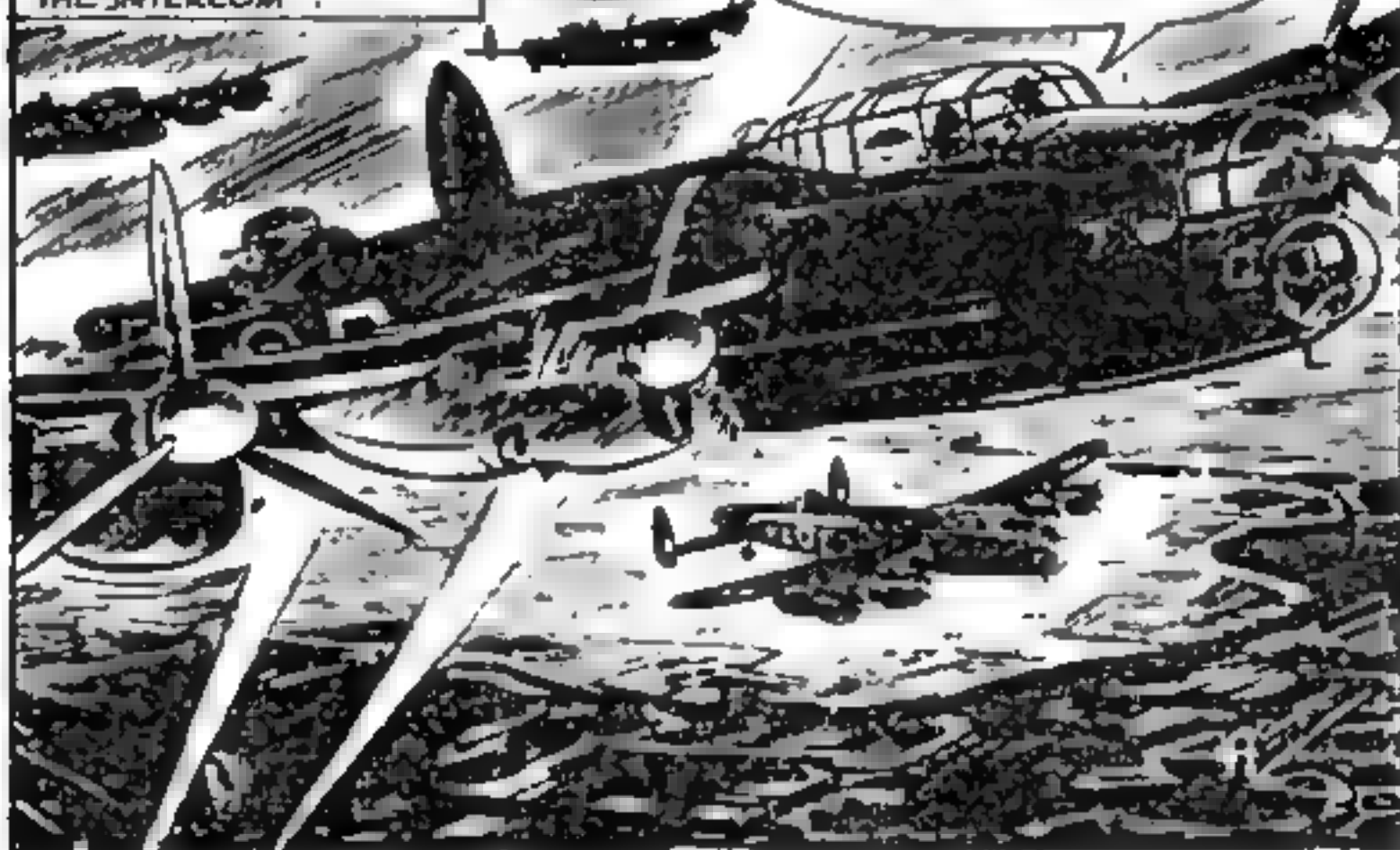
IN THE TAIL-TURRET, MIKE SIMPSON WAS THINKING ABOUT PAUL VIBART'S CARDS...

WE HAVEN'T A HOPE OF MAKING THE TRIP ON THREE ENGINES! THE SKIPPER LL HAVE TO TURN BACK!

PHEW! THAT WAS CLOSE!

WESS KNEW WHAT THEY WERE THINKING-THAT THEY WANTED HIM TO TURN BACK ALMOST MERCILESSLY, HE SHATTERED THE TAUT, EXPECTANT SILENCE OF THE INTERCOM.

CAPTAIN TO CREW! I'M GOING ON TO THE TARGET! IF WE TURN BACK NOW, IT'LL ENDANGER THE OTHER AIRCRAFT IN THE STREAM / CONFIRM MY COURSE, NAVIGATOR!



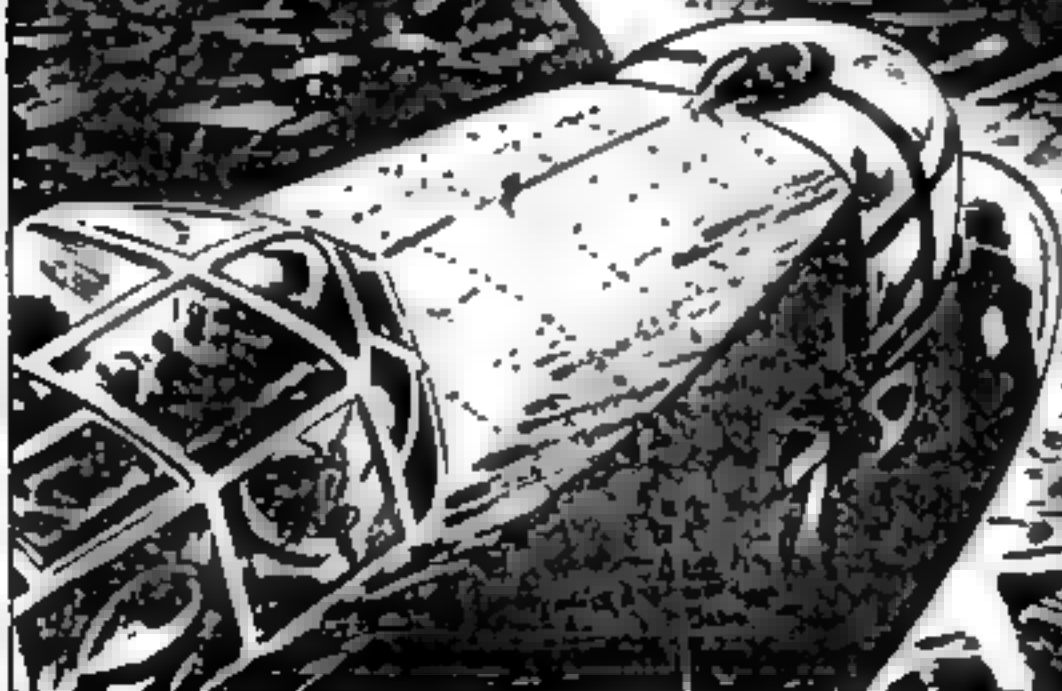
WESS COULD ALMOST FEEL THE SILENT RESENTMENT THAT FOLLOWED HIS WORDS. THIRTY SECONDS LATER, HE HEARD THE HARM, UNSTEADY VOICE OF ABB NOLAN.

NEW COURSE, SKIPPER / ONE-ONE-O MAGNETIC /



THREE MINUTES LATER, THEY LOST CONTACT WITH THE MAIN BOMBER STREAM. WITH ONLY THREE ENGINES RUNNING WEBB HAD EXPECTED THIS BUT HE WAS NOT PREPARED FOR THE SUDDEN YELL THAT CAME FROM JOHNNY MARTIN ...

HEAVY
FLAK, SKIPPER!
IT-IT'S ALL
AROUND US!



THE LANCASTER ROCKED SAVAGELY AS A HUNDRED UNSEEN GUNS BELOVED STEEL FROM THE LIVID WELL OF THE NIGHT. WEBB BELLOWED HARSHLY ON THE INTERCOM ...

ARE NOLAN WAS ONE OF THE FINEST NAVIGATORS IN BOMBER COMMAND... BUT TONIGHT HE WAS THINKING OF THE FIGURE SEVEN-AND THE BLACK ACE OF SPADES...



WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU PLAYING AT, ABET THIS FLAK WASN'T PREDICTED ON OUR ROUTE! YOUR COURSE FIGURES MUST BE WRONG!



I I CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT, SKIPPER / I MISSED MY OWN FIGURES / WE'VE RUN STRAIGHT OVER THE FLAK BATTERIES OF GUSBARR /

Chapter 5. *Unlucky for Some*

THAT WAS HOW P FOR POPPIE BLUNDERED INTO THE HEAVIEST CONCENTRATION OF DEATH IN THE RUHR.

WE HAVEN'T A CHANCE SKIPPER! YOU'VE GOT TO TURN BACK!

GET BACK TO YOUR SET, SPENCER!

TOP

NEEDS ALMOST SCREECHED THE WORDS AS HE THREW THE LANCASTER THROUGH THE FLICKERING MAELSTROM. IN THE BOMB ADEN'S COVE, JOHNNO MARTIN WAS WATCHING THE BROAD, BLUE COLUMN OF THE MASTER BEAM BULK ACROSS THE SKY.

IF THAT THING LATCHES ON TO US-WE'VE HAD IT!

THE MASTER BEAM
PROBED NEARER IN
ITS DEFUSED LIGHT,
THE FIGURE 7 ON
A POWER'S FUSELAGE
WAS CLEAR AND
STARK DES DE WEBB.
THE THIN FIGURE
OF PAUL VIBART
SAT AS STILL AS
DEATH

VIBART SEEMS
ALMOST PLEASED
THAT HIS PROPHECY
IS COMING TRUE!
DIDN'T HE REALISE
THAT HE'LL GET THE
HAMMER, ALONG
WITH THE REST
OF US?



DAZEDLY, WEBB SHOOK HIS
HEAD. NO, THE CARDS COULD NOT
BE RIGHT THE WHOLE THING WAS
FANTASTIC IT WAS THE GHASTLY,
BLUISH GLARE THAT SUDDENLY
FLOODED THE WHOLE COCKPIT
THAT WRENCHED HIM BACK
TO REALITY

THE MASTER
BEAM! IT'S GOT
US! DIVE,
SKIPPER,
DIVE!



WEBB KNEW WHAT HE HAD TO DO HE WAS PUSHING HARD ON THE STICK WHEN A STREAM OF YELLOW TRACER PUNCHED UP INTO THE LANCASTER'S PORT-INNER ENGINE.

A HIT!
WE'RE
HIT!

THEY SAT THERE, STARING AT THE STILL PROPELLER, WAITING FOR THE FATAL EXPLOSION OF IGNITED FUEL THEY WERE STILL WAITING WHEN ALBERT SPENCE GASPED HOARSELY

THE
FUEL-TANK!
IT-IT DIDN'T
CATCH
FIRE!

IT TOOK WEBB THREE SECONDS TO REALIZE WHAT HAD HAPPENED THE RELIEF MADE HIM NEARLY HYSTERICAL



OF COURSE THE TANK DIDN'T GO UP! IT WAS EMPTY! VIBART MUST HAVE FORGOTTEN TO SWITCH TO THE RESERVE!

WEBB WENT ON QUICKLY, HIS VOICE RINGING WITH TRIUMPH...

DID YOU GET THAT, BOYS? WE WERE LUCKY! EVEN VIBART'S CARDS CAN'T KNOCK US DOWN! FIRST WE'RE GOING TO FIX ONE OF THESE SEARCHLIGHTS!



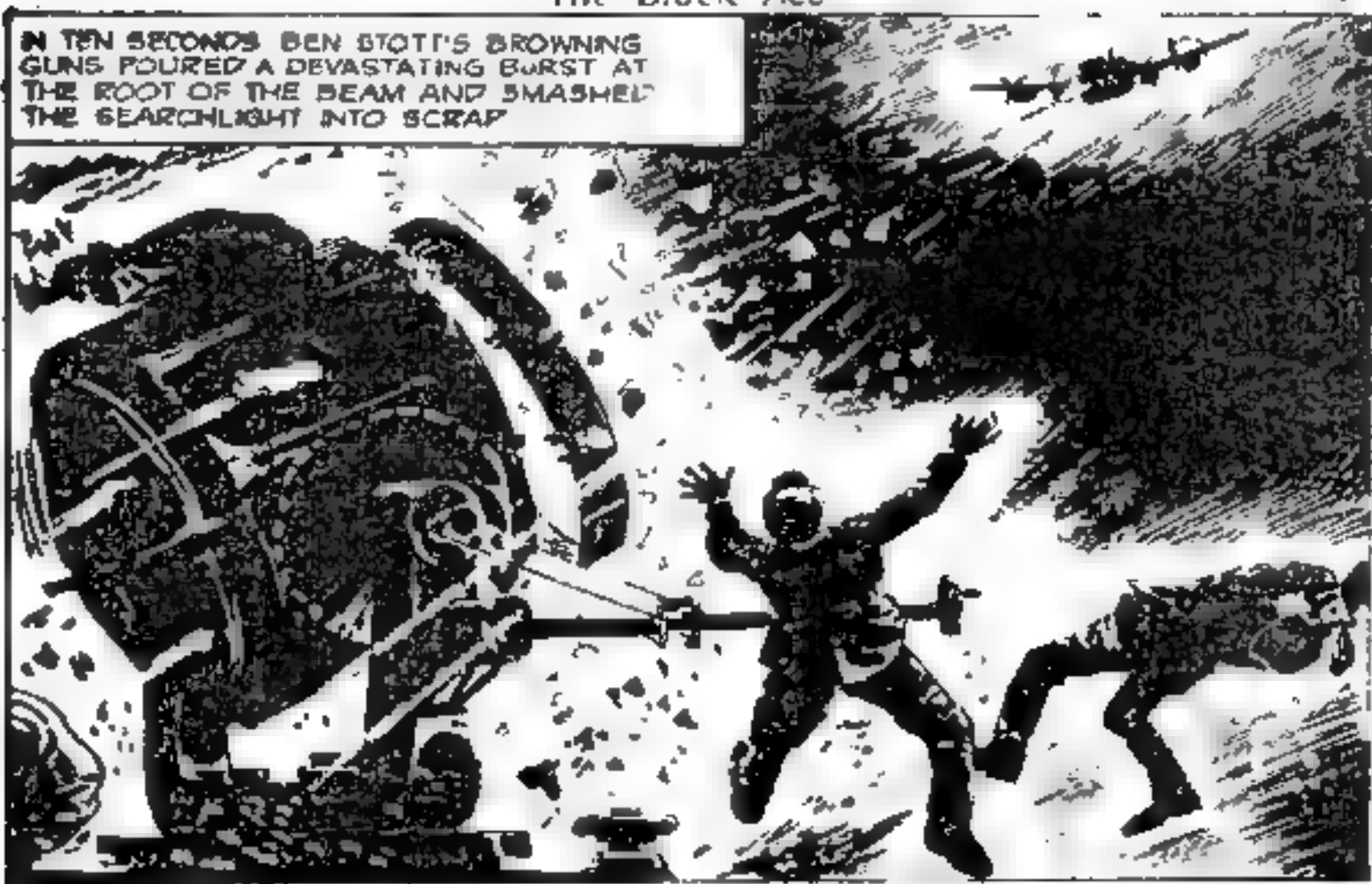
WEBB PUSHED ON THE CONTROL COLUMN WITH ALL HIS STRENGTH. P FOR POPPIE HURLED DOWN THROUGH THE BLINDING GLARE AND FLAK, TO ONE THOUSAND FEET...

NOW, BEN! GIVE THAT SEARCHLIGHT A SQUIRT!

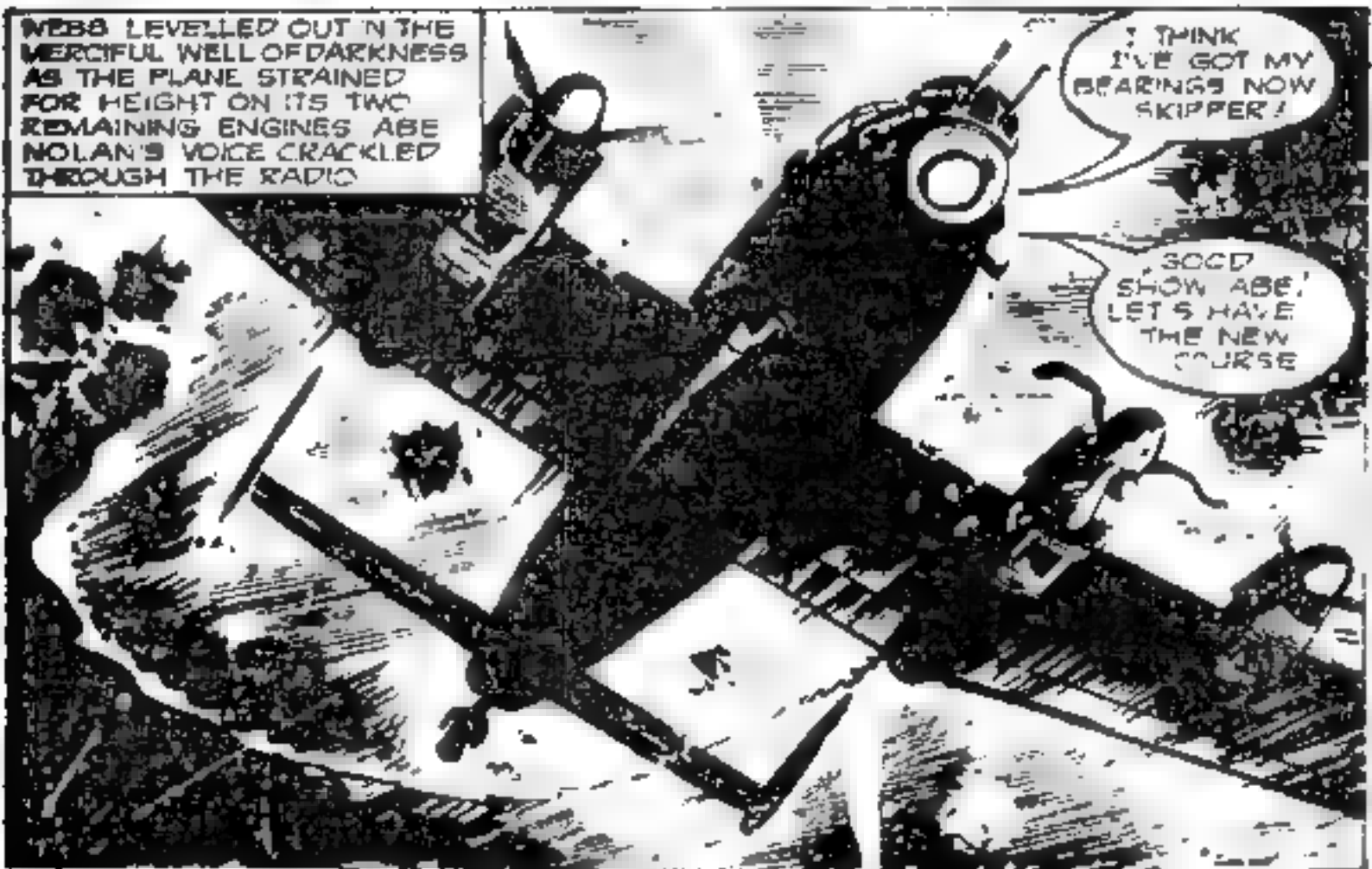
FAIR ENOUGH, SKIPPER!



IN TEN SECONDS BEN STOTT'S BROWNING GUNS POURED A DEVASTATING BURST AT THE FOOT OF THE BEAM AND SMASHED THE SEARCHLIGHT INTO SCRAP



WEBB LEVELLED OUT IN THE MERCIFUL WELL OF DARKNESS AS THE PLANE STRAINED FOR HEIGHT ON ITS TWO REMAINING ENGINES. ABE NOLAN'S VOICE CRACKLED THROUGH THE RADIO



I THINK I'VE GOT MY BEARINGS NOW SKIPPER!

GOOD SHOW ABE! LET'S HAVE THE NEW COURSE

TEN MINUTES LATER THEY FOUND THE SAILOR PAUL WHEAT WAS KILLED AS THEY BEGAN THE RUN-UP ONCE AGAIN THEY WERE THE LUCKIEST CREW IN B-1111 CLAMAND

LEFT STEADY
STEADY BOMBS
BOMB!

THEY SAW THE BLOW UP
ERUPTING AS THE BOMBS
WENT HOME THEN THE
FIRE AND THE TANKS WERE
BURNED THEM AND WERE
CLOSED HEARD THE URGENT
WILES OF HIS CREW

KEEP
WORK
AHEAD!

TAKE
US IN ME
SKIPPER!

DEAD ON
TARGET!

DARKNESS WACKED THE WHITE SEVEN ON P-POPSIE'S FUSPLAGE AS WEBB STEERED A DOD-LEO COURSE FOR HOME AS THE DUTCH COAST CAME UP, HE SPOKE QUIETLY TO PAUL VIBART...

LOOKS AS IF WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT, PAUL / PERHAPS THE CARDS WERE WRONG

VIBART HAD NO TIME TO ANSWER THEY WERE OVER THE NORTH SEA WHEN THE PORT-OUTER ENGINE COUGHED, FALTERED, THEN DIED

PORT OUTER ENGINE'S PACKED UP / FLAK MUST HAVE HOLED THE FUEL TANKS /

WEBB KNEW THERE WAS NO CHANCE OF REACHING THE ENGLISH COAST ON ONE ENGINE THE LANCASTER COULD STILL FLY FOR SOME TIME, BUT WITH A GRADUAL LOSS OF HEIGHT

WE'LL HAVE TO DITCH / CALL UP AIR-SEA RESCUE-GIVE THEM OUR POSITION!

RIGHT, SNIPPER!

WEBB TOOK THE LANCASTER DOWN TO ONE THOUSAND FEET BESIDE HIM, PAUL VIBART WAS SILENT

WE'RE IN LUCK, SKIPPER!
A COUPLE OF RESCUE SHIPS
ARE PATROLLING
TEN MILES DEAD

GOOD KEEP TRANSMITTING
OUR POSITION
AS LONG AS
YOU CAN!

WITH HER SINGLE, BOOMING ENGINE, *Popsy* BATTLED ON TOWARDS THE DAWN FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER. WEBB KNEW THAT SHE COULD NOT GO MUCH FARTHER...

DINGHY! DINGHY!
PREPARE FOR
DITCHING!

THE CREW TOOK UP THEIR CRASH POSITIONS, AND PUT THEIR FAITH IN THEIR SKIPPER

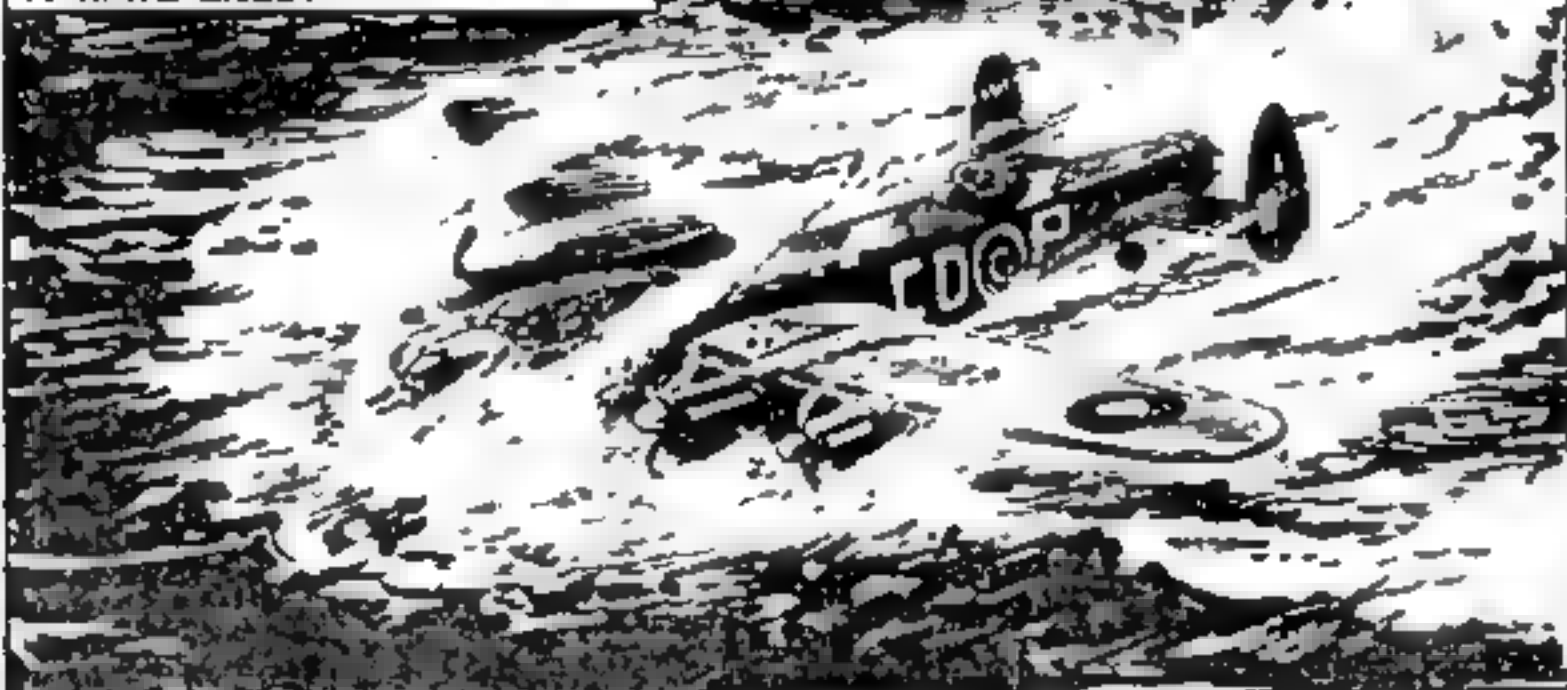
THEY THOUGHT OF THE WHITE FIGURE SEVEN ON *Popsy's* NOSE - AND WONDERED IF AT LAST THEIR LUCK HAD RUN OUT

SLOWLY, WEBB LET THE LANCASTER DOWN, AT TWO HUNDRED FEET, HE SAW THE SEA...

IT'S ROUGH!
JUST OUR LUCK!



THE WAVES LOOKED AS TALL AS HOUSES AS WEBB TURNED GENTLY INTO THE WIND AND TRACKED ALONG THE SWELL AT 110 MILES PER HOUR. THE LANCASTER'S NOSE DUG INTO A WAVE-CREST



THEN THE WHOLE AIRCRAFT SMACKED DOWN BOUNCING FROM WAVE TOP TO WAVE TOP TO A VIOLENT HALT & POPSE WAS DOWN

THE CREW RUSHED OUT OF THE HATCHES AND SKIPPED TO THE SHARDBOARD MAINPLANE. ABE NOIAN HAD THE DOLPHIN READY BY PLANE TO INFLATE IN THE TOWERING SPA.

TAKE YOUR TIME ABE! POPSIE WON'T GO DOWN YET! SHE'S RINGING THE SEA PLETTY WELL!

IT WAS A GOOD LANDING, SKIPPER!



NOLAN BOON GOT THE DINGHY INFLATED SOMEHOW. IT BROKE FROM HIS GRASP. IN THREE SWIFT SECONDS, THE WAVES HAD SNATCHED IT BEYOND THEIR REACH.

THE DINGHY / I'VE GOT TO GET IT!

NO ABE! YOU WOULDN'T HAVE A CHANCE! WITH LUCK, THE RESCUE SHIP SHOULD BE HERE SOON.

IT WAS THEN THAT YIBART SPOKE IN COLD, CONTEMPTUOUS FURY.

YOUR PRECIOUS LUCK WON'T GET YOU OUT OF THIS, WEBB / I'M GOING AFTER THAT DINGHY!

YIBART! DON'T BE A FOOL!

The Black Ace

VIBART DIVED BEFORE ANYONE COULD STOP HIM. HE STRUCK AWAY FROM THE WALLING HULK OF A POPPER AWAY FROM THE SIX MEN CLINGING DESPERATELY TO THEIR LUCK.



PERHAPS IT WAS FEAR THAT GAVE HIM STRENGTH. PERHAPS IT WAS A FANATICAL REFUSAL TO BELIEVE HIS CARDS COULD BE WRONG.

WHEN THEY LAST SAW VIBART, HE WAS STILL STRIKING OUT STRONGLY IN THE DIRECTION OF THE DINGHY. AND THE LANCASTER WAS SETTLING FAST IN THE WATER.



MAYBE VIBART DID THE RIGHT THING! ANYTHING'S BETTER THAN JUST SITTING HERE, WAITING TO DRY.

GET IT OUT, MIKE.

THE PORT MAINLAND WAS AWASH! WHEN THEY FINALLY HEARD THE THROB OF A LAUNCH'S ENGINE.



YAHOO! WHAT A BEAUTIFUL SIGHT!

WE MADE IT, SKIPPER!

OF COURSE WE'D, MIKE! WE'RE THE LUCKIEST CREW IN BOMBER COMMAND, REMEMBER?

THE LAUNCH CLOSED ALONGSIDE, AND THE GRINNING CREW PULLED THEM ABOARD...

ONE OF MY CREW IS STILL IN THE WATER. SKIPPER / HE WENT AFTER OUR DINGHY WHEN IT BROKE AWAY!



THEY FOUND THE DINGHY, BUT THERE WAS NO SIGN OF VIBART. AFTER TWENTY MINUTES, THEY WERE FORCED TO GIVE UP THE SEARCH...

POOR BLOKE / THE CARDS WERE RIGHT - FOR VIBART, AT LEAST!

OR MAYBE HE WAS JUST UNLUCKY!



PERHAPS, AS BILL WEBB SAID,
PAUL VIBART WAS JUST
UNLUCKY. PERHAPS THE
CARDS MEANT NOTHING AT
ALL. IT DID NOT OCCUR TO
THEM THEN, THAT VIBART'S
NAME HAD BEEN THE SEVENTH
ON P. POPSIE'S CREW LIST...



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